

Sun Safety and Self-Skin Checks in Skin of Color: A Guide for Patients

Zaim Haq

Sun Safety and Self-Skin Checks

Maintaining sun safety and performing regular self-skin examinations are vital for preventing skin damage and reducing the risk of skin cancers such as melanoma, basal cell carcinoma (BCC), and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun and tanning beds are the primary causes of these types of cancer. Learning how to protect your skin effectively is an essential preventive measure. Educating yourself about sun protection by discussing skin health with your doctor and considering yearly skin exams by a dermatologist can enhance your understanding and help safeguard your skin^{1, 2}.

Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer in Skin of Color

Non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) encompasses various skin cancers, each with its causes, appearances, and growth patterns. BCC, the most prevalent type of skin cancer worldwide, occurs in individuals of all skin colors. It typically manifests as shiny or waxy bumps, particularly on sun-exposed parts of the body. However, if you have darker skin, you might notice that these bumps have more color, with over half of BCC cases showing this pigmentation^{3, 4, 5}.

Squamous cell carcinoma, the second most common type of skin cancer, originates from the skin's outer layer. It often appears as scaly or crusty areas on sun-exposed skin but can also develop in scars or chronic wounds. People with skin of color may face increased risks due to factors such as chronic inflammation, scars, exposure to certain chemicals, and prior radiation treatments^{6, 7}.

Melanoma in Skin of Color

Melanoma often presents less typically in darker skin, such as on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, or under the nails, making it more challenging to recognize. Melanoma in these locations can appear as subtle changes like a dark streak under a nail or a new spot on the foot. Early detection through careful monitoring of these less-exposed areas can be crucial for effective treatment^{3, 7}.

Essential Recommendations for Sun Protection

Applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a minimum SPF of 30 is crucial. It is important to reapply sunscreen every two hours, especially if you are swimming or sweating. Wearing

appropriate clothing also significantly enhances UV protection. Consider long-sleeved shirts, pants, and wide-brimmed hats to shield your skin from the sun^{8, 9, 10}.

Self-Skin Checks

Monthly skin self-exams are a crucial practice for everyone, especially for those at an increased risk of skin cancer. These include individuals with a history of skin cancer, numerous moles, or a family history of the disease. Monthly exams help track changes and familiarize you with the normal appearance of moles, freckles, and other skin marks. For an effective examination, use a well-lit room and your phone's camera to access difficult-to-view areas, ideally after a bath or shower. Enlisting the help of a partner or family member can also ensure that no areas such as the back or scalp are overlooked.

Begin by using your phone's camera or mirror to examine your face, neck, ears, chest, and abdomen, lifting the breasts to view underneath. Continue to the arms, underarms, and hands, including the palms and underneath fingernails. While seated, use your phone or mirror to inspect your legs, tops, and bottoms of your feet, and between the toes. Use the phone's camera to view the backs of your thighs, calves, and buttocks. To check your scalp, part your hair with a comb or blow dryer. Most importantly, take pictures of any areas of concern to monitor changes over time^{8, 9}.

The Importance of Self-Skin Checks

Understanding the signs and risk factors for NMSC, particularly across diverse skin tones, is crucial for both early detection and treatment. Watch for persistent sores, unusual growths in scars, chronic skin conditions, and notable changes on the legs or bottoms of your feet. If you observe any new, unusual, or persistent skin marks, it is crucial to consult a dermatologist, especially if these marks recur or appear in unusual locations. Monthly self-skin checks can greatly improve your chances for successful outcomes and help maintain overall skin health.

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