

INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY
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Even though we are well into summer, I think sun safety reminders are important. Unprotected skin exposed to sun over a period of time can increase risk of developing skin cancer. This column will review types of skin cancer, importance of early detection and ways to protect you from the harmful effects of the sun.

The risk of developing skin cancer appears to be increasing. One in seven people will develop cancer in the United States. Of those who do, one in 100 will be melanoma, which can be fatal. One severe blistering sunburn before the age of eighteen doubles ones risk, which increases with age. As a parent of young children, this fact has caused my wife and me to be more vigilant applying sunscreen to the kids prior to playing outside. Skin cancer is more common if you are fair or light skinned, have a family history of certain types of moles, or if you spend a lot of time outdoors in the sun.

Many skin cancers occur on the face, neck, and ears. A well designed hat can shield you from the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays (that unfortunately does not include most baseball and seed caps) and can reduce the risk of skin cancer. You need the most protection at midday, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., when UV rays are the most severe. Your exposure to UV rays increases by twenty percent when reflected off a pool or lake. You can get a bad sunburn even on cloudy days.

There are three types of skin cancer: basal cell, which make up 75 percent of skin cancers; squamous cell, which make up 20 percent of skin cancers; and melanoma which make up just 5 percent of all skin cancers but results in 75 percent of all skin cancer deaths. The steady increase in the incidence of melanoma suggests we need to make better use of hats, other clothing, and sunscreen lotions to protect skin from the sun. With early identification and treatment, survival rates increase. Ninety – nine percent of basal cell and squamous cell cancers are curable. The five year survival rate for melanoma, if found early, is 85 percent.

It is important to note any changes in moles in order to detect possible melanoma. Moles that are asymmetric (one half does not match the other), have border irregularity (the outside edges are ragged, notched, or blurred), color variation (the skin pigment is not uniform but has shades of tan, brown, black or red, white, and blue), or have a diameter greater than about ¼ of an inch with sudden or continuing increase in size, should be checked by your doctor.

What can you do to prevent or to detect skin cancer? First, examine your skin carefully front and back in a mirror every 6 – 8 weeks. Take note of any changes in your skin; watch for sores that won't heal, red patches, and changes in size or color of moles. These may be warning signs of skin cancer. Consult your doctor for regular checkups and any time you are in doubt. Use suntan lotion with a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of at least 15 and wear a broad brimmed hat and other clothing to shelter you from the sun.

To learn more about how to reduce your risk for skin cancer, contact the Grundy County office of ISU Extension and ask for publication PM 1683.