

Skin exam leads to peace of mind

What a relief!

I went to a dermatologist last week and had all of my moles examined. I'd been thinking about having this done for about five years, but kept putting it off for no other reason than I was afraid to hear any bad results.

Around the beginning of each summer, the scary skin cancer public service announcements start. They warn everyone to stay out of the sun and to wear a big hat and SPF30 or higher whenever outdoors. This is all smart advice, which I typically follow. Still, I had it stuck in my head that some nasty sunburn from my childhood was going to get me someday.

When I was a kid we got to the beach early and stayed all day. Suntan lotion was designed to give your skin more color, not prevent it. I even knew people who rubbed Crisco on themselves to get a better tan. They say ignorance is bliss, but bliss is now taking the form of moles and other skin lesions that need to be checked out.

The visit to the dermatologist was interesting. She went over my entire body and mapped the location and color of every mole. They were either brown, tan or rust. She noted if they were raised or flat. She measured the diameter of each in millimeters and when we were done, I had a baseline chart of what each of my moles looks like. This way, if I suspect a change in color or size someday, I can call her up and we can compare the present-day situation to the original exam. In the case of one mole, which is quite large and has an irregular border, she examined it



Flotsam and Jetsam

By Donna Drago

with a high-powered magnifying device and also photographed it for my record.

I was delighted to hear the doctor say that everything looks good. And now, because I'm a columnist and this is what I do, I'm suggesting that everyone who's reading this might want to get some peace of mind by getting their moles checked, too.

Doctors offer a simple way to determine if a mole should be looked at by a professional. The ABCDE's of moles include Asymmetry—one side of the mole is not the same shape as the other. Border—where the edges of the mole are rough or not clearly defined. Color—typically brown or black, more than one color in a mole should send up warning signals. Diameter—if a mole is larger than 6 millimeters or one quarter inch have it checked. Elevation—moles that are raised above the skin can be of more concern.

Skin cancers typically pop up in areas where one gets frequent sun exposure and are more common in fair-skinned people with blue eyes. For men, the most likely place to get skin cancer is on the back. For women, it's on the lower legs.

The Mayo Clinic offers a lot of information about moles and how

to prevent skin cancer. They suggest staying out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. The Website says "the sun's rays are strongest during this period, try to schedule outdoor activities for other times of the day, even in winter or when the sky is cloudy."

"Wear sunscreen year-round. Sunscreens don't filter out all harmful UV radiation, especially the radiation that can lead to melanoma. But they play a major role in an overall sun protection program," the Web site says.

Sunscreen should be put on "20 to 30 minutes before sun exposure and reapplied every two hours throughout the day, as well as after swimming or exercising," for the best protection. The site lists titanium dioxide and mexoryl as two ingredients in sunscreen that are more effective at blocking the sun's rays.

Of course, the Website warns about avoiding tanning beds and tan accelerants—we should all know that, but did you know that there are many prescription drugs that can make skin more sensitive to sunlight? The Mayo Clinic lists "antibiotics; certain cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes medications; birth control pills; non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others); and the acne medicine isotretinoin (Accutane)," as being drugs that can cause the user to absorb more of the sun's rays.

There is a lot of information on preventing skin cancer on the Internet. Try www.webmd.com or www.mayoclinic.com for a start, and get those moles checked out!

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