



FUN IN THE SUN SAFELY

Protecting Skin from Damage

By Lisa K. Harris

Tucson is the Skin Cancer Capital of the United States

according to Tina Pai, MD and Board Certified Dermatologist. Pai presented a session on healthy skin at the 2007 Zuckerman Community Outreach Foundation El Tour Wellness Conference.

"We rank second in the world after Australia," Pai said. "She believes that actively avoiding sun damage is critical in order to maintain healthy skin."

Most skin cancers are caused by sun exposure, according to Pai. Skin cancer risks are tied to sunburn, and the risk rate doubles with five or more sunburns. Pai stated that 1.25 million cases of non-melanoma (basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma) skin cancer are diagnosed each year in the US. Just one blistering sunburn in childhood doubles the chance of developing melanoma, one of the more dangerous forms of skin cancers, later in life. Tanning bed use before the age of 35 increases melanoma risk by 75 percent.

Pai recommended a three-prong strategy to have fun in the sun safely.

●Protect the skin. "Avoid being out in the sun as much as possible, particularly during the midday, when the sun is at its strongest intensity," she said. "Don't go outside between 10 and 2 unless you absolutely have to."

●Cover up as much as possible. "Wear a big floppy hat that protects your face and sunglasses, long sleeves and pants." If you're cycling, "you obviously can't wear a floppy hat, but a bike helmet will offer some protection, at least to the scalp."

●Use sun block regularly. Pai recommended one with zinc oxide and an SPF of 30. Sun blocks differ from sunscreen. A sun block physically blocks the sun's ultraviolet rays, while a sunscreen absorbs the ultraviolet light so it doesn't reach the skin.

"A sun block will protect your skin better than a sunscreen," Pai said. She also suggested applying an anti-oxidant cream such as Idebenone or one that contains vitamin C. "An anti-oxidant cream will repair sun damage while it happens." Apply the anti-oxidant cream first, then the sun block. "The anti-oxidant becomes a second line of defense," she noted.

For best results, "you should follow these three recommendations even if you are not outdoors a lot." Some of her suggestions may be difficult to

adhere to, especially covering up while exercising during Tucson's warmer months. Pai recommended that cyclists wear long sleeve jerseys and tights. Helmets help, but she also suggested applying sun block directly to the scalp. "If you have a lot of hair, you might not want to rub cream onto the top of your head. But sun blocks come in sprays and powders too. Do the best you can."

Most of us have had significant sun damage, according to Pai. "We grew up in a generation where we actively sat in

youthful. Most of my patients come to me to look better, to look younger. We associate healthiness with youthful looking skin."

Skin cancer has a 99 percent cure rate if caught early enough, even the most malignant forms, according to Pai. She suggested checking skin monthly and seeing a physician annually for a skin check. "You should take a look at your skin for changes. Stay vigilant."

Danger signs include reddish colored skin; a new bump or growth; a sore that doesn't heal; a pimple that doesn't go away; a mole that bleeds, changes colors, enlarges, is asymmetrical, itches, or looks different.

"If you notice any of these signs, see you doctor," Pai recommended.

"Most skin cancers appear on the head, back of the arms, and back of the hands. The areas that are most often exposed to the sun," Pai said. But skin cancer can "come up in places that never see the light of day, like in between the toes." Skin cancers are the most common in people in their forties, but "you're never too young to look for it. It's not unusual to see cancers in young adults now, people in their 20s." Pai recommended that parents teach their children from infancy to apply sun block and to stay out of the sun.

Skin cancer rates are on the rise nationally. The exact reasons are unknown and the increase is probably linked to more than one cause.

"There are several factors involved with skin cancer rates," Pai said. "We are more aware of skin cancer as a whole so we find them more often, we grew up in a generation that tanned and consequently damaged our skin more than earlier generations, we spend a lot of time outdoors in the sun pursuing recreational activities, more so than earlier generations, so we exposed ourselves to the sun's harmful rays, and some believe the shrinking ozone layer has increased skin cancer rates."

Pai emphasized that preventive treatment is inexpensive and at hand. "Remember, before you leave the house, put on sun block and wear a hat." Both of these are simple and quick methods to prevent sun damage and ward off premature aging. As you head out the door for a ride through the "Skin Cancer Capital of the US", remember your helmet and the sun block.

Tina Pai, MD, may be reached through her clinic, Skin Spectrum, at (520) 797-8885.

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Corey Jorgensen of Skin Spectrum applying a peel. Photo by Lyda Harris

the sun and worked on a tan," Pai said. "I grew up in Hawaii and had a lot of blistering sun damage."

Pai defined sun damage as wrinkles, freckles, liver spots, age spots, sagging, and roughness. "All of these signs of aging are sun related," Pai said.

To measure sun damage, Pai suggested examining the skin under the arm.

"Look at skin that never sees the sunlight," she said. "That's the skin you were born with. Now compare the color and texture with the skin on the top of your arm, skin that is exposed to the sun on a regular basis. The difference is from the sun."

There are several different levels of treatment for sun damaged skin. These include creams like Retin-A, lasers, and chemical peels. These treatments repair the damage caused by the sun. "They can be a once-in-a-lifetime event, such as a strong laser treatment, a once a year chemical peel, or daily application of cream," Pai said.

These treatments make the skin "look healthier and consequently more

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