

Seven Skin Cancer Warning Signs

Every morning, Charlie Rose, Gayle King and Nora O'Donnell with "CBS This Morning" inform me about politics, the weather, the latest news about the virus that shut down computers across the globe while Kim Jong Un of North Korea proudly showed off his long-range missiles that can carry nuclear warheads all the way to America.

But today's medical news with dermatologist Dr. Elizabeth Hale was just as scary to me: skin cancer is the *most common form of cancer* in the United States, and melanoma is the deadliest form of skin cancer. Actually, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation, one person dies of melanoma every 54 minutes, with an estimated 9,730 people expected to die of melanoma in 2017. And it's the leading cause of cancer death in young women.

CBS News anchor O'Donnell could very well have been one of those statistics, but during a regular check-up over the Christmas holiday, Dr. Hale saw a suspicious mole and, thankfully was able to remove the cancer. While O'Donnell lives to tell about the dangers of skin cancer and the importance of early detection, more than 3.3 million people are diagnosed annually. The good news is that skin cancer is also one of the most *preventable* forms of cancer and *highly treatable* when detected early.

Dr. Hale suggests you protect yourself from the sun's damaging rays, even if you're just headed out to grocery store. On a daily basis, she said, people should be using a broad spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher. For extended outdoor activity, use a water-resistant, broad spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.

With the month of May being nationally recognized as Skin Cancer Awareness Month, Dr. Hale's interview was a timely news story with a happy ending and sage advice, especially for "sun worshippers" soaking up rays whether on the beach or the tanning bed. The vast majority of melanomas are caused by the sun. According to one study, about 86 percent of melanomas can be attributed to exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun.

But don't think a tanning bed is safer. According to Dr. Hale, a tanning bed is more directly related to skin cancer than smoking is to lung cancer.

During Skin Cancer Awareness Month, it's time to think about the skin you're in and how to protect yourself.

1. Get familiar with moles. Check for asymmetry, border, color, diameter and evolution that can include new symptoms like itching, scabbing and bleeding. See your physician to check scalp, eyelids, between fingers and toes, even behind the ears.
2. Pay attention if there's a vertical dark streak on your nail. Singer Bob Marley was 36 when he died of melanoma, which first showed up as a dark spot under his toenail and spread to his liver and other parts of the body.

The cancer can look like a pigmented black or brown streak extending the length of your nail. Or it can be mistaken for a blood blister that stays towards the base of the nail – the cuticle area – and never grows out. Remove nail polish from your toes and fingers when you go for your skin check.

3. You experience vision problems. The second most common type of melanoma is melanoma of the eye which doctors will only discover it when you get your pupils dilated during an eye exam. Less than half of patients will actually have symptoms, but if you do have them, they may show up as blurry vision, floaters, a growing dark spot on the iris, and other issues.

4. You have a ‘pimple’ that won’t go away. Basal or squamous cell skin cancer can look like a zit that doesn’t clear up after a few weeks, a sore that won’t heal or a scab that keeps recurring. The “pimple” also may go away and come right back in the same spot, and it won’t have pus when you squeeze it.

5. You notice a mole on the sole of your foot. Many people have benign spots on the soles of their feet or the palms of their hands, but these spots should also be checked out, especially if the mole is new or changing. The problem is that people often don’t think to look for moles on the bottom of their feet and many aren’t limber enough to check there.

6. You experience changes after having a mole removed. If you’ve had a mole removed and you start seeing pigmentation that’s extending outside the scar, that’s concerning even if the original mole was benign. A mole that’s spreading beyond its initial footprint means it has now changed or progressed. Be sure to tell your doctor if you spot a lump or a bump that occurs near the scar, or if you feel pain in that area.

7. There’s a black spot inside your cheek. Another less-known location where you can get melanoma is in your mucous membranes. That includes inside your cheek, nasal cavity, anal region and the vagina. None of these are caused by the sun, so it’s important that people get their mucous membranes examined.

Just as you have your blood pressure, you weight, your vision and teeth check regularly to maintain good health, keep a close watch on your skin. As with most cancers, prevention and early detection can keep you too from being a statistic. And that’s good news!

Kathy Woodham, Marketing/Public Relations director for St. Luke’s Hospital and a member of the PF3 board, avoids tanning beds but loves sunshine. She usually heeds warnings to wear sunscreen and hats.