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BROWN SKIN GETS CANCER TOO

DISCOVER SIX UNEXPECTED SPOTS WHERE THE DISEASE OFTEN HIDES

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

Now that summer is finally arriving, you can't wait to slip into sandals, shorts and bathing suits and head outdoors. But take note: Even though brown skin can have nearly three to four times as much melanin (the skin's pigment and natural SPF) as white skin, it can still sunburn, and enjoying the sun unprotected increases your cancer risk.

"Many incorrectly think dark skin is immune to skin cancer," says Marcy Street, M.D., a dermatologist in Okemos, Michigan. That assumption can prevent us from taking precautions and may be why many African-Americans diagnosed with skin cancer get the news in the disease's later—more dangerous—stages. Bob Marley suffered this fate when a sore under his toenail, thought to be a soccer injury, turned out to be an aggressive melanoma. The disease claimed the musician's life at age 36.

The most common of all cancers, skin cancer comprises two types: melanoma and nonmelanoma, according to Street. Although melanoma represents a small percentage of cases, it's more serious and aggressive. The good news is it's highly curable when caught early.

In addition to keeping an eye out for changes to the skin on your arms, legs and other exposed parts, it's important to zero in on places you'd least expect skin cancer would strike to reduce your odds of developing the disease.

HEALTHY & HAPPY

1 THE SCALP

A recent study shows that cases of melanoma of the head and neck have dramatically increased in the past few years, largely due to UV exposure. That's because few are willing to slather sunscreen on their scalp. Hair can also conceal changes to the area, like moles and dark spots, making it harder to spot skin cancer on the scalp until it has spread or advanced to later stages.

SAVE YOUR SKIN: Since sunscreen doesn't do your coif any favors, floppy hats and scarves are fashionable ways to shield your scalp from the sun's rays. "Cover your head if you're outdoors for longer than 30 minutes," says Tia Olds, M.D., a radiation oncologist in Albany, New York. "Not just when you're at a game or the beach getting constant exposure, but if it's partially cloudy, too. UV rays are still present on overcast days and when it's cold." If you aren't keen on covering up your do, then apply mineral powder makeup with SPF to your scalp. And for early detection, ask your hairdresser if she notices moles, bumps or color blotches that weren't there before or that have changed.

2 THE EYES

It's tough to apply sunscreen to eyelids or skin around your eyes, leaving that skin at risk. Skin cancer can also occur behind the iris, says Charlotte Akor, M.D., an ophthalmologist in Abilene, Texas.

SAVE YOUR SKIN: Wear sunglasses with lenses that offer UVA and UVB protection year-round to shield your eyes and the surrounding skin, says Akor. For an added layer of defense, use eye creams that contain SPF.

3 IN AND BEHIND THE EARS

"Ears are usually forgotten about, so they rarely get sunscreen," says Olds. The Skin Cancer Foundation reports less than 33 percent of people use sunscreen and ears are commonly missed.

Protect Your Body

Sunscreens formulated with UV blockers can have a white appearance and look chalky, purple or gray on dark skin. As a result, many African-Americans forgo slathering it on before going into the sun, says dermatologist Shani Francis. That's a no-no. Along with the risk of skin cancer, skipping SPF can greatly increase the risk of sunburn and premature aging. Here's how to choose a sunscreen that will shield your skin without discoloring it.

GO BIG. Use a broad-spectrum covering UVA and UVB with a minimum of SPF 30 to protect from wrinkles and reduce your risk of skin cancer.

GET COLORFUL. Search for tinted sunscreens that help balance out the chalky look of ingredients like zinc.

GO SHEER. Chemical UV blocks are transparent on skin. Francis suggests products with oxybenzone. "It's easily absorbed into the skin."

SAVE YOUR SKIN: Unless you wear a hat that completely shades your ears when you're outside, Olds says, you need to apply sunscreen to them.

4 UNDER THE NAILS

Beneath toes and fingers is one of the most common places melanoma appears on African-Americans. Genetics can increase the risk of developing it, but manicures may also play a role. Covering the nails with the hottest polishes can delay diagnosis. "Your doctor can't spot signs of melanoma under a nail if it's covered with polish," says Shani Francis, M.D., a dermatologist and University of Chicago professor. That's especially dangerous because melanoma can spread very quickly and be fatal.

Olds cautions that even though there's no evidence linking an increased risk of melanoma to UV lights for drying nails, those tools essentially act as tanning beds: "Unless you apply SPF, you're exposing your hands and nails to potentially harmful UV rays."

SAVE YOUR SKIN: Use sunscreen on your hands and check your nails for dark dots or streaks. See a dermatologist if you notice anything. And wipe off any nail polish before going for your annual physical.

5 THE GROIN, GENITALS AND BUTT

Sun exposure ups the odds of melanoma. Family history also factors into getting the disease in places that don't see much sun. "About 10 percent of those with melanoma have family history," says Street. "People with noncancerous moles are also predisposed to melanoma."

SAVE YOUR SKIN: "Look at areas you might not show your doctor," says Francis. Use a mirror for hard-to-see places or take turns with your sweetie looking at your backsides.

6 BETWEEN THE TOES

Sun exposure—often from sandals and flip-flops—is a common culprit contributing to skin cancer on the foot. That's because many people don't think to apply sunscreen between the toes, on the sides of their feet or on their soles when lying on the beach.

SAVE YOUR SKIN: In addition to treating your feet to SPF whenever they're going to be exposed to fresh air, Francis suggests giving your tootsies a thorough inspection to promote early detection.

Dissect the Spots

Knowing what skin cancer looks like can help you detect potential issues. Remember the ABCDEs of melanoma, and if you notice any skin changes, talk to your doctor.

(A)SYMMETRY One half of the mole or spot is unlike the other half.

(B)ORDER The mole or spot has an irregular or poorly defined border.

(C)OLOR The tint of the mole or lesion is varied in different areas.

Shades include tan, brown or black, or sometimes white, red or blue.

(D)IAMETER Although they can be smaller, melanomas are usually larger than the size of a pencil eraser.

(E)VOLVING The mole or skin lesion looks different from others, it's changing in size, shape or color, or it itches or burns.