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Preventing Skin Cancer

Updated:

August 2011

IT'S YOUR HEALTH



This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Preventing Skin Cancer

THE ISSUE



Most cases of [skin cancer](#) are preventable. You can reduce your risk of getting skin cancer by taking some simple but important steps.

Skin plays a vital role in keeping you healthy. It is the largest organ in your body, and it protects you from things like dehydration, the sun, bacterial infections, and pollution. But there are limits to your skin's ability to provide protection. Different factors can cause damage that cannot be repaired. This is how skin cancer can develop.

TYPES OF SKIN CANCER

There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and malignant melanoma.

Most cases of skin cancer in Canada are either basal or squamous cell carcinomas. These skin cancers tend to develop later in life on areas of skin that have been exposed many times to the sun (like the face or neck). Basal and squamous cell carcinomas

progress slowly and rarely cause death because they usually do not spread to other parts of the body. These cancers can be removed by surgery.

Malignant melanomas are different. They account for about 5% of all skin cancers and are the type most likely to be fatal. Unlike other skin cancers, they tend to develop earlier in life and progress rapidly. They may develop on almost any part of the body.

The occurrence of [skin cancer has been increasing](#) in Canada at a fairly constant rate over the past 30 years. In 2010, there were roughly 75,500 new cases of basal and squamous cell carcinomas reported in Canada, and about 5,300 new cases of malignant melanomas.

CAUSES OF SKIN CANCER



One of the main causes of skin cancer is exposure to [ultraviolet radiation \(UV rays\)](#). UV rays are invisible, and are produced by the sun and [tanning lamps](#). Most often, skin cancer is caused by too much exposure to the sun.

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UV rays cause skin cancer by creating changes in the cells of the skin. In some cases, the UV rays cause direct damage to the cells. Tans and sunburns, for example, are both signs that UV rays have damaged the skin. In other cases, UV rays cause skin cancer indirectly, by weakening the immune mechanisms in skin and the rest of the body.

Many studies of skin cancer show links between malignant melanomas and a person's intolerance (sensitivity) to sun exposure. The studies show that people who have suffered many severe sunburns in childhood are at greater risk of developing skin cancer. The features most closely related to intolerance to sun exposure include fair or freckled skin, blue eyes, and light-coloured or reddish hair.

REDUCE YOUR RISK

Most people can prevent skin cancer by avoiding overexposure to the sun and other sources of ultraviolet light, like tanning lamps. To avoid the harmful effects of UV rays, you should:

- Find shaded areas for outdoor activities.
- If you have to spend long periods in the sun, wear a broad-brimmed hat and clothing with a tight weave, including a long-sleeved shirt, long pants and gloves.



- If you cannot cover up, use a [sunscreen lotion or spray](#) with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15. Make sure it has both UVA and UVB protection. Apply liberally to exposed skin 15 to 30 minutes before going out in the sun, and re-apply 15 to 30 minutes after sun exposure begins. You should also re-apply sunscreen after any activity that could make the product come off, like swimming, towel drying or excessive sweating and rubbing.
- Avoid going out in the sun without protection, especially between [11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.](#) during the summer months.
- Avoid using tanning beds and lamps.
- Be aware that certain medications can make your skin more sensitive to UV rays. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about your medication.

The precautions listed above are especially important for babies and children, who are at greater risk than adults because of their more sensitive skin. Also:

- Do not apply sunscreen to a baby less than 6 months old.
- Never let infants or young children play or sleep in the sun in a playpen, stroller or carriage.
- Never let young children stay in the sun for long periods, even when wearing sunscreen.
- Get your children used to wearing sunscreen lotion early on. Pay close attention to the areas that are most exposed, like their face, lips, ears, neck, shoulders, back, knees, and the tops of their feet.
- Give teenagers sunscreen lotion if they are going to be outdoors for extended periods during the summer. Make sure they understand the importance of using it.
- Encourage teenagers to avoid using tanning lamps. Health Canada does

not recommend the use of tanning equipment – especially for people under the age of 18.



The best way to detect skin cancer in its early stages is to examine your skin often. See your doctor right away if you notice any of the following:

- abnormally dark or discoloured patches or spots
- bleeding, crusting or change in the colour, size or shape of a mole

THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA'S ROLE

[Health Canada](#) analyzes and manages health risks related to UV radiation and promotes public awareness of the harmful effects of UV rays. As part of this work, Health Canada regulates tanning lamps and monitors equipment compliance under the [Radiation Emitting Devices Act](#). In addition, Health Canada publishes the [Guidelines for Tanning Salon Owners, Operators and Users](#).

[The Public Health Agency of Canada](#) monitors [cancer](#) in Canada. This involves identifying trends and risk factors for cancer, developing programs to raise awareness of the ways to reduce cancer risks, and doing research to evaluate risks from the environment and human behaviours.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Health Canada's website on **Ultraviolet Radiation** at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/radiation/ultraviolet/index_e.htm
- The Public Health Agency of Canada's **Cancer** website at: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cd-mc/cancer/index-eng.php
- Environment Canada's **UV Index and Ozone** page at: www.ec.gc.ca/uv/default.asp?lang=En&n=880ACC87-1
- Health Canada's **Sun Safety** Web site at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/sun-sol/index-eng.php
- *It's Your Health* – **Sun Safety** articles at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/alpha_e.html#s
- The Canadian Cancer Society's **Sun and UV** Web site at: www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/standard/0,2939,3543_13247__langId-en,00.html

FOR INDUSTRY AND PROFESSIONALS

- Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control at: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcmc/index-eng.php
- Cancer Surveillance On-Line at: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcmc/surveil_e.html

RELATED RESOURCES

For safety information about food, health and consumer products, visit the *Healthy Canadians* website at: www.healthycanadians.gc.ca

For more articles on health and safety issues go to the *It's Your Health* web section at: www.health.gc.ca/iyh

You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-276-1245*

Updated: August 2011
Original: May 2003

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Catalogue# H13-7/111-2011E-PDF
ISBN# 978-1-100-19173-7

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