

MELANOMA MYTHS

Sure, you make your GYN appointments, hit yoga class (sort of) regularly and try to eat plenty of veggies. But do you pay attention to your skin's health? Skin cancer, including melanoma, is treatable when caught early, but you should know the truth about this serious condition. Here are some common myths about melanoma.

By Arricca Elin SanSone



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MELANOMA IS RARE

Sadly, it's not. While melanoma isn't the most common type of skin cancer, it's responsible for the most deaths, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. In fact, the number of new invasive melanoma cases diagnosed annually went up by 54 percent from 2009 to 2019.

MELANOMA LOOKS LIKE A TYPICAL MOLE

Melanoma may show up as a new spot, a changing mole, a dark streak under or around a finger or toenail or a slowly growing patch of thick skin. And melanoma doesn't always appear brown like most moles. "If there's more than one color in a mole or black, blue or red pigment, get it evaluated by your dermatologist," says Meghan Feely, MD, a dermatologist who practices in Bernardville, Cedar Grove and NYC. Surprisingly, melanoma can also appear as a white, pinkish or skin-colored spot.

PEOPLE OF COLOR DON'T GET MELANOMA

"This is absolutely not true," says Rebecca Baxt, MD, a dermatologist in Paramus. "Anyone can be diagnosed with melanoma. People of color often get diagnosed at later stages when it's more difficult to treat." Yes,

people with fair skin or light eyes and hair are at higher risk for melanoma, but no one is immune.

THE SUNSCREEN IN MY MAKEUP PROTECTS AGAINST SKIN CANCER

Sorry, you literally can't slather enough on to achieve the SPF listed on the label. It's fine to wear makeup that contains SPF, but add a layer of sunscreen with at least 30 SPF or higher and reapply every two hours and after swimming or sweating. Don't skip the backs of hands, ears, lips and tops of feet.

I WON'T GET MELANOMA BECAUSE I DON'T SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN THE SUN

Even if you steer clear of the sun now, your risk of melanoma increases if you have a history of multiple sunburns as a kid. Other risk factors include being fair skinned, having lots of moles, a personal history of cancer such as thyroid or breast or a family history of melanoma. No matter what, do monthly self-exams (go to skincancer.org for details) and have a dermatologist do a skin cancer screening annually, says Baxt.

MELANOMA ONLY APPEARS ON SKIN THAT'S BEEN

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EXPOSED TO THE SUN

"Melanoma can appear anywhere on the body, including the back of the eye, in between toes or on the bottoms of feet," says Feely. "People of color often develop it in areas such as the palms and soles, mouth, nail bed or groin." It also can appear on the scalp. In women ages 15 to 29, the most common location is the torso. Because melanoma can appear in places where the sun doesn't shine, it's important to get general wellness checkups regularly, including eye and dental exams.

TANNING BEDS OR GETTING A "BASE TAN" ARE SAFE

A thousand times no! People who use a tanning bed before the age of 35 increase their risk for melanoma by 75 percent, according

to the Skin Cancer Foundation. A tan means you've sustained skin cell damage. Just don't do it.

THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT MELANOMA

There's plenty you can do, even if you weren't the best about sun protection in the past. "Wear sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat," says Feely. "Seek shade, particularly when the sun's rays are their strongest between 10 am and 2 pm." And see your dermatologist ASAP if you find anything remotely concerning.

I CAN'T FIND A SUNSCREEN I LIKE

There are many different formulas nowadays, so keep searching to find one

that's right for you, says Baxt. Look for broad spectrum (UVA/B) with a minimum of SPF 30; lotions or sprays are fine as long as you apply liberally and reapply every two hours. For sensitive skin, look for ingredients such as zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, which are often better tolerated.

MELANOMA ISN'T CURABLE

"The majority of cases are caught early and are curable," says Baxt. "There are so many new treatments, and the field is changing rapidly." If you've been diagnosed with melanoma, don't be discouraged. Identifying melanoma is the first step toward healing.

—Arricca Elin SanSone is a New York-based health and lifestyle writer.

