

Tan Now, Pay Later: An Important Message for Patients

Until a few short years ago, almost everyone thought that spending hours in the sun would get you something commonly called "a nice healthy tan." Now we know better, and an important message is finally getting around: a tan isn't healthy—it's the sign of an increased risk of skin cancer and other problems.

According to the American Academy of Dermatology, skin cancer is now so common in the United States that one out of every five Americans will develop skin cancer in his or her lifetime. More than 1 million new cases of skin cancer were diagnosed in 1998, and the risk of melanoma—the deadliest of the skin cancers—doubles every 8 to 10 years.

OTHER CONSEQUENCES OF TOO MUCH SUN

Skin cancer is the most serious health risk from excessive sun exposure, but other problems can also occur. Another common consequence of skin damage from the sun (also known as *photodamage*) is the development of rough, scaly spots called *actinic keratoses* (AKs). Although AKs are not cancerous, skin cancer may develop later from these lesions.

Photodamage also causes cosmetic problems on the face and other areas of the skin exposed to the sun. These include fine or coarse wrinkling, roughness, dark spots, and laxity (which causes the skin to sag).

TREATMENTS FOR PHOTODAMAGE

Fortunately, a number of treatments are available to repair some of the damage caused by excessive sun exposure. For example, skin cancer that is detected in its early stages can be successfully treated. Topical medication or other techniques (such as freezing with liquid nitrogen) are helpful in eliminating AKs.

The cosmetic consequences of photodamage can be minimized by a variety of products and techniques. Several topical treatments have

been clinically tested and found to be helpful in reversing some of the damage from sun exposure. In addition, dermatologists and plastic surgeons use products such as chemical peels and techniques such as dermabrasion, laser therapy, and surgery, to correct such cosmetic problems.

A word of caution: many products now sold over-the-counter carry claims that they reverse the effects of photodamage. Your health care provider is the best source of current, accurate information about products that have been clinically tested and proven to be of benefit.

PROTECTION FROM PHOTODAMAGE

The following are three simple tips for protecting yourself from the harmful effects of sun exposure.

- Avoid sun exposure (as much as possible) during the hours of 10 am to 4 pm. That's when radiation from the sun is strongest.
- Cover your skin. Loose, light clothing—long pants and long-sleeved shirts—will keep you cool but protected. A hat with a brim is a must to reduce sun exposure on the face and neck (and, if you have some hair loss, to protect your scalp as well).
- Use a sunscreen routinely. Many moisturizers and cosmetics are now formulated with a broad-spectrum sunscreen ingredient, providing some protection from minimal sun exposure. However, if you'll be spending time outdoors, add a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 or higher (depending on how easily your skin burns and how long you'll be outdoors).

This educational handout may be photocopied and distributed to patients at the discretion of a health care provider.

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