

Living in Lake Tahoe increases risk of getting skin cancer

By Kathryn Reed

Cancer is still one of those words that people think should be whispered, or that it should not be said outside of a close-knit circle. Even worse, people think the diagnosis is an automatic death sentence.

Yes, cancer attacks various parts of the body and to different degrees. Yes, a lot more needs to be known about the causes, a lot more research done to find cures, more people should get the tests that would render an early diagnosis, and people could be living a life that perhaps would prevent them from getting certain cancers.

For now, the one thing that most people won't be immune from is having cancer touch their lives – be it a personal diagnosis, that of a family member, a friend or a colleague.



One application of sunscreen is not enough.

I've experienced all of those.

My father is proof you don't die from cancer. He had colon

cancer; did the whole chemo thing. He lived for many years before he died two years ago this month from a heart attack.

My good friend has cancer. She had 18 chemo treatments. The last one may have been this week. We'll know after a CAT scan later this month how the drugs she's been infused with have attacked the cancer.

In the last six months I have had two basal cell skin cancer spots removed – one from my calf, one from my neck. (In the world of skin cancer, I have the good kind.)

Maybe my dad's diet had something to do with his colon cancer. Maybe my friend's choices in life had something to do with her diagnosis. I'm sure my fair skin exposed (overexposed?) to the sun brought on my growths.

But the problem with cancer is there isn't always a definitive cause – not yet, any way.

I went to a lecture this week by Ronald Gemberling, a plastic surgeon affiliated with Barton Health, to hear what he had to say about skin cancer.

While he gave some information, much of the presentation was showing disturbing pictures of people with melanoma – the bad skin cancer. Perhaps it's because he is a surgeon paid to work on those types of things that he thought it necessary to spend more time talking about "fixing" things than preventing them.

An alarming statistic to me was learning how prevalent skin cancer is. In 2011 in the United States there were more than 2 million skin cancer cases. All other cancers tallied 1.6 million cases.

Gemberling said with people living longer it contributes to doctors seeing more patients with skin cancer. It's one of those diseases that creep up on you.

I've already damaged my skin from years of sun bathing,

playing tennis without sun protection, not wearing a hat and believing I looked so much better with a tan than with my pasty-white Scandinavian skin.

Still, having chunks of my skin removed was a wake-up call. I now own a wide brimmed hat to protect my face and neck from sun. I'm putting sun block on my face more often. I'm working up to every day – that's a memory issue.

Gemberling (who is not my doctor) said it's important to choose a block and not merely a sunscreen. He also says 15 SPF is all that is needed.

That last part contradicts things I've read and what my sister, Pam Valentine, who is a nurse practitioner and for years specialized in oncology, tells me. She and the doctors she works with recommend SPF 50 "because you are getting better coverage and blocking more of the UV rays."

SPF stands for sun protection factor.

The theory is the more protection, the better. And look for products that work on keeping out UVA and UVB rays. Most only repel the latter.

Gemberling and Valentine agree whatever level is used it needs to be reapplied and that there is no such thing as water- or sweat-proof sunscreens.

Living at higher elevations like Lake Tahoe has its own set of problems. Gemberling said for every 1,000 feet in elevation it increases the risk of getting skin cancer by 4 percent. With Tahoe being at 6,200 feet, just living here means a greater chance of getting skin cancer than if one resides in the Bay Area.

Gemberling said two in five people living in Lake Tahoe would get skin cancer. That's 40 percent of the population.

