

Not protecting skin could result in melanoma

By Fu-Tong Liu

We think of our skin as protecting us but often ignore the importance of protecting our skin. With summer here, this is risky.

Melanoma, a deadly type of skin cancer, is on the rise. Among the 3.5 million skin cancers that will be diagnosed in the U.S. this year, about 76,000 will be melanomas, according to the American Cancer Society.

Skin cancer is common, accounting for more than half of all other cancers combined. Most non-melanoma skin cancers are basal cell, the slowest growing type, or squamous cell carcinoma. Melanomas develop from the pigment-making cells of the skin. In California, new melanoma cases are expected to top 7,050 in 2012, with 4,180 cases occurring in men and 2,870 in women, and 925 deaths.

Skin cancer is more common in sunny regions, like Lake Tahoe, where the sun shines more than 75 percent of the time, 300-plus days per year on average.

In 2012, 270 new cases of melanoma are expected in Sacramento County; 150 in Placer County and 75 in El Dorado County. **These are risk factors associated with melanoma skin cancer:**

- Unprotected exposure to natural (sun) and artificial sources of Ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Individuals using sunlamps and tanning booths before age 30 are at increased risk.
- Having three or more severe, blistering sunburns puts individuals at a greater risk.
- Personal and family (two or more relatives) histories of

melanoma.

- Genetic characteristics such as pale or freckled skin, red or blond hair or blue or gray eyes.
- Multiple or unusual moles.

Experts believe one reason for the skin cancer increase is better vigilance; people are spending more time checking their skin for unusual growths. Early detection is improving with whole-body checks and individuals watching regularly for changes on their skin, including new moles. **You can detect beginning signs of melanoma by looking at moles using the “ABCDEs”:**

- Asymmetry where one half of the mole looks different than the other half.
- Border that is irregular, ragged, notched or blurred.
- Color that is uneven.
- Diameter that increases, usually wider than 6 millimeters or about one-quarter inch.
- Evolving appearance of the mole over the past few weeks or months.

Melanoma is curable if detected early. **You can prevent the disease by doing simple things:**

- Limit your time in the sun, particularly between 10am and 4pm when the rays are the strongest. If you're outside during that time, stay in the shade.
- Generously apply sunscreen with a 30 SPF (sun protection factor) or higher up to 30 minutes before going outside. Apply regularly every two hours and immediately after swimming.
- Protect your head, face, neck and ears with a wide-brimmed hat.

- Wear long sleeves and pants made from tightly woven fabrics
- Wear UV radiation protection sunglasses.
- For individuals 20 years and older, get a skin examination checkup with your physician during a periodic health examination.
- Conduct monthly ABCDE self -examinations.

Whether it's sunny or gloomy outside, cancer experts urge you to protect your skin and as the American Cancer Society's campaign slogan suggests "Slip, Slop, Slap and Wrap" as a reminder to slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, slap on a hat and wrap on sunglasses.

Fu-Tong Liu is a medical doctor and a distinguished professor and chair of dermatology at UC Davis Health System and a member of the National Cancer Institute-designated UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center.