

Common myths about skin cancer

That lovely tan is skin damage.

There are so many myths and misconceptions about skin cancer, it's hard to know where to begin!

The sooner we debunk some of these myths, the sooner you can start protecting yourself. So, let's start with the first and most dangerous myth — that skin cancer isn't a big deal.¹

Myth: Skin cancer isn't as bad as other types of cancer.

When someone mentions skin cancer, do you think: *"That's not a big deal. Skin cancer is like a pimple or a mole, right? The doctor just cuts it out and I'll be fine."*

This is a deadly misunderstanding of skin cancer. The rays from the sun that penetrate the skin are radiation. They can cause damage at the cellular level and spread to other parts of your body.

There are several forms of skin cancer:

- Basal cell carcinomas (BCCs) are most common but not usually life threatening. Basal cell carcinomas are usually found on skin that's chronically exposed to the sun.
- Squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) are less common than BCCs but more aggressive. They can appear anywhere, even areas that aren't exposed to sun. Early detection is essential because SCC can spread to other areas of the body.
- Melanomas are less common than the two non-melanoma skin cancers, but they are the most lethal form of skin cancer because of how rapidly it can spread to other parts of the body. Once it spreads, the remission rate drops significantly.

Myth: Getting a base tan will protect you from getting skin cancer.

No, the first tan isn't preventing skin cancer. In fact, it may be the first step toward developing skin cancer. A tan may be attractive, but it's actually a defense mechanism (a pigmentation) by your body to protect it from the sun's harmful UV rays. Unfortunately, a base tan only gives your skin an SPF of about 3 to 4. SPF stands for Sun Protection Factor, which is a rating that tells you how long you can stay in the sun without getting burned while wearing that sunscreen. Various authorities recommend an SPF of 30 or even higher.

Myth: You can only get skin cancer on parts of your body that are exposed to the sun.

There's a type of skin cancer that can develop on the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet and under your nails. You can also get skin cancer on your genitals and between your fingers and toes. Do your own skin checks regularly. And ask your healthcare provider — or a dermatologist — to check out anything on your skin that appears and doesn't go away or changes shape or color.

Myth: A tanning salon is a safe way to tan.

No, it's not even close to safer. Tanning beds emit three to five times the intensity of the sunlight you would get at noon in the summer. Remember this: a tan is a sign of skin damage. Ask your healthcare provider about sunless tanning products, and especially how to use them safely. But don't confuse sunless tanning products with sunscreen. They have no sun protection properties at all.

Myth: If you stay under an umbrella at the beach, you're fine.

Ambient or indirect UV rays make up about half of the UV radiation that we're exposed to. Shade protects against direct UV radiation, so shade only cuts your exposure in half. That's why you need to think of changing your sun exposure habits with a mix of shade, sunscreen, the right kind of clothing, and limiting your sun exposure when the sun is at its strongest.

Myth: Sunscreen causes cancer

There are multiple scientific research studies and clinical trials on the use of sunscreen. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, regular daily use of sunscreen can reduce the risk of developing melanoma by 50 percent.²

Myth: Specially treated fabrics are a waste of money: the minute you wash them, it washes out the sun-protection chemicals.

Actually, the opposite is true. Washing your new ultraviolet protection factor (UPF) garments can shrink them slightly, which can close up holes in the fabric. So, washing can actually improve the effectiveness of UPF clothing.

Myth: Only people with really pale skin get cancer.

According to the National Cancer Institute,² anyone can get skin cancer. It may be more common among people with lighter skin tones, but if you have dark skin, you're still at risk.

Myth: You can't get skin cancer in the winter or when you're in a pool.

This is another very dangerous myth. UV rays can bounce off surfaces such as water, snow, and glass, hitting your skin twice and increasing the intensity of exposure.

1. <https://www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-information/skin-cancer-facts/>, April 2020
2. <https://www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-prevention/sun-protection/sunscreen/>, January 2020
3. https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/risk_factors.htm, April 2020

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