

overexposed:

The truth about
tanning and cancer

BY ELISABETH HANDLEY



What's your sunburn and tanning history?

According to the American Academy of Dermatology, people with skin types I and II are at greatest risk. Which skin type are you?

I - Always burns; never tans; sensitive ("Celtic")

II - Burns easily; tans minimally

III - Burns moderately; tans gradually to light brown (average Caucasian)

IV - Burns minimally; always tans well to moderately brown (olive skin)

V - Rarely burns; tans profusely to dark (brown skin)

VI - Never burns; deeply pigmented; not sensitive (black skin)

Prevention is everything

To avoid sun exposure, dermatologists recommend these simple tips:

- Lube up liberally and often with an SPF of 15 or higher every day, even when it's cloudy.
- Choose a sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB rays; look for brands that contain zinc oxide and titanium. You don't need to buy the most expensive sunscreen; studies show cheaper brands work as well as pricey ones. But check the expiration date, as ingredients may degrade over time.
- Apply 30 minutes before going out into the sun.
- Use an ounce (a shot-glass full) to cover your body.
- Reapply every two hours and after you're done swimming.
- Don't stay in the sun for long periods because you feel protected by sunscreen.
- Wear sunglasses, wide-brimmed hats, pants and long sleeves.
- Limit sun exposure, especially midday between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Tans are NOT healthy

Contrary to Diana's belief that her tan protected her from sun damage, a tan is really a sign of sun damage. Overexposure – whether a tan or burn – damages the DNA of the dividing cells in the epidermis. Those cells become abnormal when the DNA is damaged and proliferate abnormally to develop cancers.

"DNA damage accumulates," says Dr. Ball. "Even when the burn or tan goes away, the damage does not."

Check-ups are critical

"To this day I haven't told my parents about the cancer," Diana says. "They always

worried about my tanning and would have freaked out."

And rightly so. Baby oil, Crisco and tin foil were Diana's tanners of choice in her teen years. And though she'd learned the dangers of those practices and had been making wiser choices since her 20s, the damage was probably already done.

"Most damage occurs before the age of 18," says Dr. Ball. "But it's never too late to protect and prevent further harm."

Diana now gets checked by the dermatologist every six months, and it's recommended everyone over 40 be checked by a health professional once a year, whether they have a history of skin cancer or not. These check-ups can help catch those nasty cancers early, and ease the mind of anyone concerned about a mole or red spot.

The ABCDEs of skin cancer detection

Detection is as easy as ABC! Here's what to look for when checking your moles:

A - Asymmetry: If the mole were divided in half, the two halves would be different in size and shape.

B - Borders: Mole is irregular – not a nice round circle.

C - Color: Moles that are variegated in color are suspect.

D - Diameter: Melanomas tend to be larger in size than regular moles.

E - Enlarging: Any mole that has grown rapidly or appeared after the age of 35 should be checked.

Dermatologists recommend women check their skin once a month. Doing it at the same time as your monthly breast exam will make it easier to remember. **BB**

Elisabeth Handley is a contributing writer to Body Beautiful magazine.

