

The Sun and skin cancer

The incidence of skin cancer is increasing worldwide and this article looks at the warning signs and the precautions that can be taken to avoid this condition.

Diagnosis

Skin cancer can be cured if it is diagnosed early. It is most commonly diagnosed by physical examination and biopsy (the removal and examination of tissue).

Warning signs

Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous type of skin cancer. It spreads very quickly to nearby tissues and if diagnosed late, treatment may not be able to cure this cancer.

Melanoma occurs on areas of the skin that are exposed to sunlight. Look out for bleeding moles and moles that change colour, shape and size. Moles that start to scale, crust or itch can also be an indication of skin cancer. Other types of skin cancer include basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma.

Risk factors

Over-exposure to ultraviolet radiation, in the form of sunlight or sunbeds, is the main cause of skin cancer. You have an increased risk of skin cancer if you have a close relative with skin cancer or if you have very fair skin and/or more than 50 moles on your body.

Prevention

- Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor of 15 to 30, even on cloudy days, and when you are sitting in the shade.
- Avoid the sun during peak exposure hours (10 am – 3 pm).
- Wear protective clothing and a wide-brimmed hat.

Treatment

Most types of skin cancer can be treated successfully by surgical removal. Radiotherapy and chemotherapy may become necessary, once melanoma has spread. Most moles do not signal melanoma (cancer) but patients should bring any suspicious mole or skin change to the

attention of their doctor immediately. Skin cancer is highly treatable, but the survival rate drops drastically once it has spread.

