

“Slip, Slap and Slop”

It is the time of year that our part of the earth draws nearer to the sun. With this comes less clothes and the exposure of our skin to the sun. In 1991, 15,000 people were diagnosed with skin cancer, with the anticipation of this number rising. Given this information, we need to develop a different approach to how we expose ourselves to the sun and means of protection. One very critical and alarming fact is that the harmful or pre-cancerous cells, which lead to skin cancer, develop within the first twenty years of life. It is said that every time a child (young adult) experiences sunburn it doubles their risk of developing pre-cancerous cells. So as parents, grandparents, coaches or anyone who have children outdoors we must take time to ensure children are protected.

The best way to do this is to adopt the “slip, slap and slop” mantra. “Slip” into long-sleeved shirts and pants, “slap” on a wide brimmed hat that ensures shading of the ears, nose and lips (baseball caps help to shield the face but not the ears while floppy hat shades the entire face). “Slop” on the sunscreen. Sunscreens come in various levels of protection, it is recommended to use a product that offers a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or greater blocking both UVA and UVB rays. It should be applied approximately half hour prior to sun exposure and every couple of hours thereafter. It is important to apply the sunscreen liberally and to ensure that the nose, lips and ears are included. It has been indicated that males have a higher incident of skin cancers on their back and shoulders as they will often have their shirts off while females have a higher incidence on the back of their legs as shorts and skirts are worn. Check the best before date on your bottle and if your sunscreen was exposed to freezing through the winter (left in the cottage over winter) make sure to discard and purchase new.

Another protection strategy is to limit your outdoor activities to the later part of the day when the sun is not at its strongest, for example in Australia they educate the children that if their shadow is shorter than they are they should avoid being outside as the sun is directly above them and is most intense but if their shadow is longer or taller than them it is safe to play as the sun has begun to set and is less intense.

Even though the pre-cancerous cells are developed in our youth, adults must take care to limit their exposure as over exposure can weaken the immune system which is the body’s defense mechanism and when compromised can lead to other disease processes and is believed to perhaps allow any of the earlier developed pre-skin cancer cells to advance. Careful self-monitoring of moles and freckles are critical, watch for any changes in size, shape or color. If you have any suspicions contact your physician.

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