It’s Never Too Late to Protect Your Skin from Cancer

By Melanie Reynolds
County Health Officer

After winter gloom and spring showers, who doesn’t want to bask in a little summer sun?

Sunshine does provide Vitamin D, which can help keep bones from getting thin and brittle. Studies show that it might even lower a person’s risk of heart disease and diabetes.

But it’s much safer to take a vitamin supplement than to expose your skin to the damaging ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun. It’s always important to protect your skin when you head outdoors, because those UV rays are the primary cause of skin cancer.

Cancer Risk Rises with Age

The longer a person lives, the more likely he or she is to develop skin cancer and die from it. Between 40 and 50 percent of Americans who live to age 65 will have skin cancer at least once, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Heredity and indoor tanning also play a role.

Dr. Kara Addison, a Helena dermatologist, says sun exposure between the ages of 0 and 28 is especially significant in increasing the risk of skin cancer. The damage accumulates. Studies show that getting just five sunburns in your lifetime more than doubles your chances of developing melanoma, the most serious and potentially deadly form of skin cancer.

UV damage is not only responsible for skin cancers, Addison added. It also can cause pre-cancerous sores, age spots, wrinkles, and loss of skin elasticity.

Risk Factors for Older Adults

Several factors put older adults at risk from the cancer-causing rays of the sun:
They grew up in the “old days,” when a suntan was considered a sign of good health. Lots of people never used sunscreen, or they slathered on baby oil or tanning lotions that didn’t provide much protection. (I confess to being guilty of this.) We know now that a tan, like a sunburn, is a sign of skin damage.

They migrate to sunnier climes, like Florida and Arizona, where they can enjoy more outdoor activities. In Helena, the high elevation intensifies UV exposure.

As people age, their skin becomes thinner and drier. This allows UV light to penetrate more deeply and cause more severe damage. They become more sensitive to sunlight and can burn faster than they used to.

The body’s immune system slows down naturally with age, making it harder to fight off diseases like cancer. Some medical conditions, like heart disease and type 2 diabetes, also limit our immune response.

Older adults are more likely to take medications that increase their sensitivity to sun. These include antibiotics, antidepressants, antihistamines, blood pressure drugs, cholesterol drugs, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) like aspirin.

**Lifelong Protection**

So what to do? Protecting your skin is not a big burden. It’s a lifelong habit that all of us can and should adopt. Here are some simple steps to take:

- Stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. That’s when UV rays are at their strongest.
- Hang out in the shade whenever possible.
- Wear sun-safe clothing, including a wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and UV-filtering sunglasses. Check into clothing with a UPF, or UV protection factor. It tells you how well the fabric blocks UV rays.
- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher. Apply it generously several minutes before you go outside. Reapply at least every two hours or immediately after swimming or heavy sweating.
- Watch for suspicious skin growths. Show your doctor any growth with an irregular border, multiple colors, persistent pain or itching, bleeding, or increasing size. You and your partner can take turns examining parts of your bodies that you can’t see yourself.
- Visit a dermatologist at least once a year for a full-body exam. Ask to see pictures to help you understand what the various types of skin cancer look like.

It’s never too late to reduce your skin cancer risk.

And as Karrie Fairbrother, a nurse at St. Peter’s Hospital and past president of the Dermatology Nurses Association (DNA) likes to say, “Spread the word to younger generations! Be a great role model to your younger family and friends!”

For more information, visit [www.skincancerprevention.org](http://www.skincancerprevention.org) or the SunAWARE website of the DNA at [www.dnanurse.org/resources/sun-aware/](http://www.dnanurse.org/resources/sun-aware/)

**Sidebar:**
Helena Mayor Jim Smith will sign a proclamation at the May 22 City Commission meeting, declaring May 31 “Don’t Fry Day.” The public meeting is at 6 p.m. in the City-County Building, 316 North Park, Room 330.

The National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention has designated the Friday before Memorial Day as Don’t Fry Day to encourage sun safety awareness and to remind everyone to protect their skin while enjoying the outdoors.

Learn more at [www.skincancerprevention.org/programs/dont-fry-day](http://www.skincancerprevention.org/programs/dont-fry-day)