

Dept. of Health warns: There's no such thing as a safe tan

Written by By NM Dept. of Health
Friday, 13 May 2016 04:49



As I type this, it's cloudy. Yesterday it was sunny and hot. That's New Mexico weather for you.

But if there's one thing I've learned hiking and cycling across the state, it's you can get a sunburn no matter the temperature.

The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) is gearing up to get the word out about National Skin Cancer Detection and Prevention Month this May, but for us living in the desert southwest, there's no doubt this is a message that needs to be taken to heart year-round. As much as we love the sun, the truth is overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays causes not only sunburns and premature aging, but greatly increases our chances of developing skin cancer.

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States. The number of new cases of nonmelanoma skin cancer appears to be increasing every year. These nonmelanoma skin cancers can usually be cured.

Melanoma is not as common as nonmelanoma skin cancers, but it is more dangerous because it grows and spreads quickly. The number of new cases of melanoma is also increasing – and has for at least 30 years. NMDOH reports skin cancer cases to be one of the most common cancers in our state, and it has been for years.

According to the National Cancer Institute, melanoma is found most often in men on the skin on the head, on the neck, or between the shoulders and the hips. In women, melanoma is often found on the skin on the lower legs or between the shoulders and the hips.

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Melanoma is rare in people with dark skin. When melanoma does develop in people with dark skin, it is usually found under the fingernails, under the toenails, on the palms of the hands, or on the soles of the feet.

The National Cancer Institute reports if your skin freckles, tans poorly, or burns easily after sun exposure, you are particularly susceptible to developing skin cancer.

A tan can slightly lower the risk of sunburn, but even people who tan well without sunburning have a higher risk of skin cancer because of more lifetime sun exposure.

Sunburns during childhood or adolescence may be particularly significant to our chances of one day getting skin cancer, according to researchers.

That's why the New Mexico Department of Health supports sun safety education for elementary-school-age children and encourages schools and communities to identify strategies to provide increased protection for children and adults alike.

It's why you see so many school playgrounds these days with shade structures if tall trees aren't available where kids are playing. Students in some cases are allowed to wear protective clothing like hats, sunglasses and long-sleeved shirts and pants when outside at school.

The hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. are the most hazardous for UV exposure outdoors not just here in New Mexico but also the entire continental United States. UV rays from sunlight are the greatest right now during the late spring and throughout the summer.

Remember, UV rays from the sun can reach you on cloudy and hazy days, as well as bright and sunny days. UV rays also reflect off of surfaces like cement, sand, and water. Indoor tanning (using a tanning bed, booth, or sunlamp to get tan) exposes you to UV radiation, too.

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The New Mexico Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend the following easy ways to protect yourself and your loved ones from UV radiation:

- Stay in the shade, especially during midday hours.
- Wear clothing that covers your arms and legs.
- Wear a hat with a wide brim to shade your face, head, ears, and neck.
- Wear sunglasses that wrap around and block both UVA and UVB rays.
- Use sunscreen with sun protective factor SPF 15 or higher, and both UVA and UVB protection.
- Avoid indoor tanning altogether.

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