

Sun safety lowers Montanans' skin cancer risk

By Sheri Pope

Each year, the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention recognizes the Friday before Memorial Day as “Don’t Fry Day” to raise awareness for sun safety. Skin cancer caused by harmful exposure to UV rays is the most common cancer in the United States. It is estimated that 9,500 Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer every day.

Melanoma is the most serious and often fatal type of skin cancer. Montana is the sixth worst state for new melanoma diagnoses with 30.5 cases per 100,000 people in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The national average rate is 23 cases per 100,000.

Agricultural work and advanced age contribute to the state’s high rate of melanoma. Agriculture is a way of life for many Montanans and our state has a high and growing over-65 population. As we age, the risk of developing melanoma increases because cells of the outer layer of skin grow thinner, making the skin more susceptible to sunburns.

Other skin cancer risk factors include having many moles and family history of the disease.

Everyone is at risk for skin cancer, no matter their skin color. While light skin can burn more easily, patients and providers often don’t recognize skin cancer on darker skin, delaying diagnosis. The American Academy of Dermatology recently developed a new curriculum to educate the next generation of healthcare providers to better detect skin cancer across different skin tones.

The Montana Cancer Coalition’s statewide Cancer Control Plan focuses on two key skin cancer prevention strategies:

- Increase the number of organizations that use sun safety practices.
- Reduce the proportion of adolescents who use artificial sources of ultraviolet light for tanning. Using tanning beds can increase the risk of developing skin cancer at any age, but is especially risky for teens. Using tanning beds before the age of 20 can increase the chances of developing melanoma by 47%. The risk increases with each use.

The lamps used in tanning beds emit UV radiation, which causes most skin cancers. Indoor tanning can increase the risk of developing the two most common types of skin cancer – squamous cell carcinoma and basal cell carcinoma – by 58% and 24%, respectively.

Sunburns are cumulative risk factors. The more exposure we have, the higher the risk. Protective clothing like hats, long sleeves, sunglasses and applying sunscreen are good measures of safeguarding your skin on sunny days. For children under the age of 6 months, check with your doctor before applying sunscreen.

Finding shade in the peak hours of sunlight can help reduce risk as well. Be aware, reflective surfaces like concrete and water can intensify sunburn. Sun damage can also happen on cloudy and cool days.

Along with risks, sunlight has benefits. Sunlight can improve your sleep, reduce stress, strengthen the immune system and help maintain strong bones. Taking precautions to limit your exposure to UV rays is key to a healthy relationship with the sun. Enjoy the long Fry Day weekend. Please remember to: slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen and slap on a hat to prevent sunburn.

Sheri Pope, a prevention health specialist RiverStone Health, can be reached at 406-247-3215 or by email at Sheri.pop@riverstonehealth.org.