

## Sun worshippers, beware of skin cancer

By JESSICA RONGITSCH, M.D.

Growing up in Minnesota, I learned to worship the sun at an early age. It is the sun, that makes the long and treacherous winter, not only bearable – but beautiful.



From the warmth of my Seattle home, I can wistfully say that a sunny, Minnesota winter day – when the sky is blue, and the sun reflects off the twinkling snow and icicles – is about as

beautiful as it gets. In fact, sun worship has its own feast day, in Minnesota, on the first Sunday in May the May Day Festival. On that day (unless it is rescheduled due to snow) Minnesotans gather by the thousands to celebrate the spring thaw and to welcome in the sun in the form of a giant, papier mache yellow orb that floats across a pond toward the cheering crowd.

When I first moved to Seattle I found the darkness unbearable, and would have gladly traded the tepid gloom for 30-below and sunny. Years later I am slowly growing accustomed to the grayness, but I still live for the bright and sunny days where you can see all the way from the Olympics to the Cascades. That is why it is so hard for me to write about this month's topic – skin cancer.

The sun might be wonderful for the spirit, but, unfortunately, it's not so good for the skin. Not only does the sun cause wrinkles and premature aging, it also causes skin cancer in one in five Americans in the course of a lifetime.

There are three different types of skin cancer:

Basal cell cancers and Squamous cell cancers are the most common of all skin cancers. They typically appear on areas of sun-exposed skin, but can occur anywhere on the body, including mucous membranes (lips, genitals.) They often appear as:

- An open sore that won't seem to heal after three or more weeks;
  - A reddish patch, sometimes with an adherent crust or scale, or raised, rolled border;
  - A pearly or waxy bump or scar-like area;
  - A wart-like growth that crusts and occasionally bleeds.
- Basal cell cancers usually have an excellent prognosis. So do squamous cell cancers, if caught relatively early.

Melanomas are the most serious form of skin cancer and the incidence is increasing rapidly – especially in women under 40. In fact, melanomas kill more young women than any other cancer, and claim a total of 7900 American lives each year. Even melanoma, however, is treatable, if removed quickly, before it is given a chance to metastasize. Early detection is crucial.

Melanomas can occur anywhere on the body. Here are the ABC's:

- A. Asymmetry: they are typically asymmetrical, whereas benign moles are usually round and symmetrical.
- B. Border: melanomas have ragged, or irregular borders, while benign moles usually have smooth borders.
- C. Color: they often contain multiple shades of brown or black, whereas benign moles are usually a single shade of brown.
- D. Diameter: They are often greater than 6mm in diameter.

While general knowledge of skin cancer characteristics is good to have, don't sweat the details, that's what medical school is for. Instead, your job is to check your skin head to toe at least every three months, and see your doctor if you notice anything that is new, changing, or suspicious.

And now that the beautiful sunny weather is right around the bend, don't forget to protect yourself. Not only will it help your skin age gracefully, but it will decrease your chances of developing a skin cancer. While the best protection is to stay out of the sun all together, for those of us who find that impossible, put on your floppy hats, and bling bling shades; lather on the sunscreen (SPF 15 or greater) and appreciate those rays while they last.

## French cheese chef cuts up during Market festival



A French cheese vendor delighted visitors to the first-annual Market Cheese festival in May, sharing cheese that was as colorful and flavorful as his presentation style.  
Photo/Ritzy Ryciak

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