



# Sun Safety

## Worth the Effort

**IT'S SPRINGTIME, AND AFTER THE COLD** winter, most of us are excited to be able to wear t-shirts, capris, maybe even shorts and a tank top on extra-warm days. Whatever you do wear in the increasingly nice weather, the fact remains that our skin is exposed to a lot more sun this time of year than it is in the fall and winter months.

Skin cancer and cancers in general are really not topics that we bring up in casual conversation. They seem depressing, and some of the messages we see in magazines or other places may seem extreme or condemning, so they are often ignored.

I know this because I was one of the people who thought I was invincible (as many teens do), and that "skin cancer" was not really anything to get worked up about. This was before my life was turned around by this, "skin cancer," that was later revealed to me as Melanoma.

Melanoma first touched my family when my grandmother was diagnosed with it in 2001 and died months later in 2002 in a hospice care facility at 69 years of age. Her diagnosis was originally that she had a simple plantar's wart on the heel of her foot, and it just needed to be removed. For as long as I can remember, my "Grammy," was

the most sun-safety conscious woman I knew. When her doctors later found out that she did not have a plantar's wart on her foot, but a malignant Melanoma that had spread throughout her body, we were all shocked. Even after the death of my grandmother, I still chose to lie out in the sun and visit tanning booths as well without the protection of sunscreen. Unfortunately, it took another tragedy in my family to wake me up to the dangers of Melanoma.

My 35-year-old Aunt Lesley died in 2004, two years after being diagnosed with stage four Melanoma. She left behind my Uncle, a two-year-old son, Ben, not to mention a large group of family and friends who all loved her dearly. I finally decided to visit the dermatologist two months after her death, just to make sure that my moles were safe. I was 19 at the time, and had no worries about what the doctor might say.

He looked over my skin and told me that a mole I had on my upper left calf looked odd, and he was going to remove it and send it to a pathologist for a report. It was not a very odd looking mole. It was brown and fairly symmetrical, but there was a minute black spot on it that was barely recognizable to me.

During the next two weeks that I waited for the results from the pathology report I was care-free. My family, who had just endured the loss of my aunt, was

very frightened however at the slight possibility of another Melanoma victim in the family.

Two weeks after removal, my dermatologist called and spoke with me about the results of the pathology report. He told me: "I have good news and I have bad news." I wanted to hear the bad news first. He stated that the mole which was removed from my leg turned out to be Melanoma. The good news, he said, was that it was in the very early stages, so it was quite possible that I could be completely free of this particular Melanoma spot as long as they went in and took out skin around the area of my mole to be sure it had not spread to the surrounding tissue or anywhere else in my body. My mom, of course reacted hysterically over the doctor's news.

I scheduled an appointment for less than a week later to have a three-inch by three-inch incision made to remove the tissue on my calf that could contain Melanoma.

Luckily, the results of that pathology report told us that the tissue was clean, but this event changed the way in which I valued my life, and viewed sun protection.



The invincible attitude that I held, I have found out to be prevalent in girls my age. I lived very much in the now, and paid no attention to the consequences of my actions, baking in the sun and in tanning beds while omitting sunscreen, could have on my life, and on my family.

Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer, accounting for about 62,190 cases of skin cancer last year, and a majority of the almost 11,000 skin cancer deaths each year according to the American Cancer Society. This is the

time of year where we start shedding our winter layers and expose more of our largest organ, our skin, to the sun. Melanoma is the most common cancer in women ages 25-29 and it is second only to breast cancer in women 30-34 according to the Melanoma International Foundation. The MIF also states that although sunburn at any age causes melanoma, eighty percent of sun damage happens before the age of 18.

I am now 21 years old, and have been melanoma-free since 2004, but its dangers still haunt me. My 19-year-old sister recently had a similar removal to mine on her chest for a questionable mole. I would like the women in my age group to understand the ravaging effects that unprotected sun-exposure can have on their bodies, and for the mothers of young girls or teenagers to warn their daughters about the seriousness of Melanoma. After seeing what kind of damage the sun has ultimately done to my family, I would hate to see any other family deal with the same pain.

Alternatives like Mystic Tanning, (a spray-on tan booth), and a myriad of vastly improved self-tanners are widely available and safe UV-free ways to get a golden look in the warmer months without the irreversible damage to your skin, so take advantage of them, and encourage other women to do so as well!

So make sure that as you step outside this spring and summer, you think twice before leaving your skin vulnerable to the harmful rays of the sun, and monitor your moles! Any changes you see should be talked about with your doctor or dermatologist. Following sun safety guidelines can protect you and your loved ones from the damage sun can have on your skin and your life.