



Dr. David P. Van Dam

## Skin Cancer – What, Me Worry?

ULTRAVIOLET FROM THE SUN is a dangerous form of radiation, not simply innocent “rays”. The sun’s rays are part of the electromagnetic spectrum that includes harmful gamma rays and X-rays, as well as visible light and infrared. The dangerous consequences of overexposure to X-rays may have fatal consequences, and so can overexposure to ultraviolet radiation—it just takes longer for the most serious effects of UV radiation to become apparent. Additionally, medical research shows that there is no minimum level of sun exposure that is safe and there is no such thing as a “safe tan”. As for vitamin D, oral supplementation can safely provide adequate levels of vitamin D. Appropriate doses depend on age, and you should ask your doctor about the amount you should

take. If you want to keep your skin looking younger, sun avoidance and sun-protection are the most important measures you can take.

Everyone experiences negative effects from being in the sun, including accelerated aging of the skin. Tanning beds can be even worse than natural sunlight in accelerating skin aging. They are proven to increase the risk of skin cancer, especially melanoma.

The effects of UV radiation on aging of the skin include thinning of the skin, earlier onset of wrinkles, and unsightly brown age spots (“liver spots”). People with these conditions are also at a much higher risk of developing skin cancer.

Skin cancer effects one in five Americans and sun exposure causes nearly all of them. The most common skin cancers are basal cell carcinoma (approximately 4 million per year), squamous cell carcinoma (1 million per year), and melanoma (nearly 90,000 in 2017).

Melanoma is the most serious skin cancer and one person dies every hour from melanoma in the United States. The good news is that with early detection, if you are diagnosed with melanoma, there is a 91 percent survival rate. In addition, new treatments extend the lives of people with melanoma and completely eliminate the disease in some patients with advanced disease.

Nearly all basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers are curable with in-office surgery, but more advanced forms of these cancers can lead to significant disfigurement. Dermatologists want you to be in the percentage of people who do not develop skin cancer (while remaining as youthful-looking as possible).

Practice sun-safe behaviors: Sun avoidance, UPF (Ultraviolet Protection Factor) protective clothing, hats, and regular use of higher SPF (Sun Protective Factor) sunscreen products. Complete sun avoidance may be impossible, but avoiding the most intense solar radiation between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. is advisable.

Finally, the use of high-SPF sunscreen products is crucial. Most people do not receive the full SPF protection indicated on the labels of sunscreen products. This is due to the proven inaccurate labeling of some products but, primarily, sunscreen SPF testing procedures are significantly different from the way people actually use sunscreens. Typical usage appears to provide approximately 1/3 of the SPF indicated on product labels and, in order to receive a protection level of SPF 30, consider using products labeled as SPF 90 and reapply every two hours.

You can have wrinkled, age-spotted skin, or you can have youthful looking skin. You can have skin that is scarred by treatment of skin cancers or pre-cancerous lesions, or you can have flawless skin. Your health-oriented decisions about sun exposure put you in control of your destiny. The choice is yours! U

David P. Van Dam, M.D. is certified by the American Board of Dermatology and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology and the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. Dr. Van Dam has practiced in Barrington since 1979 and is the founder of Versa Medi Spa, Chicagoland’s first medical spa owned and directed by a board-certified dermatologist. Dr. Van Dam earned a Master of Business degree (MBA) from The University of Chicago in 2007 and is dedicated to continuing medical education, attending hundreds of courses and symposia on general dermatology, dermatologic surgery, laser technology, and aesthetic dermatology as well as remaining current with the medical journals and educational audio courses and podcasts on all aspects of dermatology.