Sun Sense

Think blacks don't get skin cancer? Well, forget that myth and slather on some sun protection.

May 25, 2010 By Kat Noel

After a particularly nasty winter across the country, it's a safe bet that people are excited about summertime.

But don't be like 63 percent of African-American adults who skip using at least one form of sun protection. If you plan on rushing out into the summer sunshine, add sunscreen to your list of pre-exposure prerequisites.

African-American adults who routinely ignore this advice might do so because they incorrectly believe that melanin, a pigment that gives the skin its color, provides darker-skinned individuals with enough sun protection. It's a common misperception that's fueled by public education efforts that primarily target white populations, says Susan Evans, MD, director of dermatology at Cosmetic Physicians of Beverly Hills.

"Melanin absolutely provides blacks with a bit of sun protection," Evans says. "However, with the ozone layer being depleted the way it is, we live in a different time than our grandparents and their parents. The kind of skin protection we need now is much different from what they had to do to protect themselves from the sun."

But Melissa Potter, 26, didn't consider the ozone layer and the consequences of prolonged sun exposure during a dream vacation to Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

"It was the first day of the trip, and in my excitement and haste I dropped my luggage, threw on a bathing suit and headed straight to the beach," Potter recalls. "It was an extremely sunny day, but I jumped right into the ocean."

In total, Potter spent about four, sun-filled hours in the water, only breaking occasionally to sip a beverage. The next morning, she paid for ignoring her sunblock.

"I literally woke up screaming," Potter says. "My entire upper body was red and nearly blistered due to my negligence. It really put a damper on the trip. Each time I dressed or undressed, I screamed in pain."

Evans says that stories like Potter's are common and should remind us that it's necessary we be especially mindful when we're near water and sand since both reflect the potentially damaging rays of the sun.

While African-American skin may not burn as easily as that of lighter-complexioned people, excessive sun exposure can lead to premature aging in all skin tones. This condition not only includes wrinkles and an uneven skin tone but also may lead to melanoma. And while melanoma is uncommon in African Americans, Latinos, and Asians, it is frequently fatal for these groups.

"A lot of folks don't know that Bob Marley [the legendary reggae singer] died of [malignant] melanoma," Evans says. "Melanoma is deadly because it's very deep in the skin. And it also has access to blood vessels and can travel throughout the body."

This is what happened to Marley, whose melanoma spread from his toe to his lungs to his brain. In the celebrated biography *Catch a Fire*, author Timothy White writes that Marley's doctors diagnosed him with the cancer, but the singer dismissed recommendations he amputate his toe to stop the melanoma from spreading. Marley refused to consider this option because of his distrust of doctors and because his Rastafarian religious beliefs did not approve of amputation.

As a result, reggae lost one of its pioneering artists, essentially to a cancer Marley might have beaten with early detection and proper treatment.

In fact, melanoma is less common among blacks than whites, but black men and women are more likely to progress to advanced stages of the cancer because some, like Marley, don't trust physicians.

Blacks with this cancer also have higher mortality rates because lesions caused by melanoma are less visible on darker skin. As a result, doctors diagnose African Americans' skin cancer much later.

Another factor that hinders detection is that this potentially life-threatening disease isn't only caused by sun exposure and may also develop in areas of the body not exposed to sunlight, such as the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. For example, symptoms of melanoma include brown or black bands under the nails of toes and fingers, which could be easily be mistaken for merely an unsightly nail infection.

But melanoma and other forms of sun damage to any part of the body can be avoided. Doctors recommend that people wear broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher to block damaging sun rays year-round. This is especially important for people who already have a skin condition.

Broad-spectrum sunscreens are those that protect skin from both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. These invisible rays damage skin cells and cause both apparent and

hidden injuries. Reapply sunscreen about every two to three hours, even on cloudy days, and after swimming or sweating, advises the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD).

Plus, it's a good idea to apply sunscreen 20 minutes before sun exposure since it takes this long for these products to work, explains the AAD.

Evans offers additional suggestions: "Make sunscreen part of your daily skin regimen and add it to a moisturizer, especially one with antioxidants such as vitamin C or E," she says. "Moisturizer keeps the skin healthy and builds up a barrier that protects from the sun and makes the skin stronger."

In general, blacks and other dark-complexioned people should remember to lavish sunscreen on those "forgotten" areas of skin that aren't usually exposed to the sun. Why? Because the soles of the feet and palms of the hands are areas where African Americans typically have skin cancer.

Also, remember that being properly dressed helps because clothing can act as sun protection. Clothing made from tightly woven fabrics reflects heat and helps keep skin protected, dermatologists say. In addition, sun protection clothing and accessories, such as wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses, protect your eyes from ultraviolet rays.

Thinking of frolicking on the beach or lounging on a boat? The AAD recommends that everyone avoid outdoor activities between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are the strongest. The academy also suggests applying the "shadow rule" when going outdoors. The rule is based on a simple observation that's easy to remember. Step outside and look at your shadow. If your inseparable companion is shorter than you are, the sun's damaging rays are most harmful.

Of course, the best sun protection rule you can observe is to stay inside and out of the damaging rays. But let's get real. Most of us prefer long, lazy days of fun in the sun. Also, some of us have to work in the great outdoors.

If that's the case, cover up with sweat-proof and water-resistant sunscreen. Dermatologists suggest using easy-to-apply products that spray on. They also advise wearing sunblocks with titanium dioxide or zinc as ingredients, especially during water activities. And reach for thick, heavy, creamy products when choosing a sunscreen, Evans says. You want a product that shields your skin with a protective barrier.

Evans also emphasizes that you can enjoy outdoor activities without being exposed to direct sunlight. Find a shady spot or plant a beach umbrella in the sand to decrease your exposure to ultraviolet rays. Voilà! You get to enjoy all the outdoor scenery you want without the skin-damaging effects of sunlight.

"Yes, tanned skin is what our society perceives as beautiful," Evans acknowledges. "But it can be taken to the extreme and become dangerous. Learn to love your healthy skin."

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