Cancer risk cited for state

Sunbathers who live in southeast Louisiana, have fair skin, blue or green eyes and get freckled easily are among the most susceptible targets for skin cancer in the United States, cancer studies show.

The highest incidence of skin cancer in the nation has been recorded in those areas of southeast Louisiana which border the Gulf coast, according to Dr. Robert G. Wellbaecher, president of the Cancer Association of Louisiana. Dermatologists have isolated two factors to explain the high incidence of skin cancer in Louisiana and other southern states, he said.

"The total number of hours of sun exposure during one's lifetime and one's skin type are the most significant factors influencing an individual's risk of developing skin cancer," said dermatologist Dr. Elizabeth McBurney, board member of the Cancer Association of Greater New Orleans.

Dr. McBurney said the risk of skin cancer is higher in the southernmost areas of the United States because they are closer to the equator — the area which receives the greatest amount of direct ultraviolet rays from the sun.

Areas farther from the equator, including the northern parts of the country, receive fewer direct ultraviolet rays and the incidence of skin cancer is correspondingly less in these areas.

The effects of overexposure to ultraviolet rays from the sun, sunlamps or other sources develop over one's lifetime and are the result of an accumulation of exposure.

Like other forms of cancer, skin cancer develops over time. Skin cancer is rarely found among individuals younger than 20. Frequent sunbathing in one's youth can lead to increased sensitivity to the sun in later years.

Individuals with the lowest risks of skin cancer have a higher level of melanin (skin pigment) which provides good protection from ultraviolet damage. Blacks and olive-toned Caucasians have a markedly lower incidence of skin cancer — except in cases where their occupation or life style entails lengthy exposure to the sun's rays.

Individuals with fair complexions, blue or green eyes, and who get freckles or sunburn easily are most prone to skin cancer. Those sensitive to the sun are familiar with the immediate results of overexposure to ultraviolet sun rays — severe sunburn, tenderness of skin, blistering, fever, and in the long run premature aging of the skin.

Individuals taking certain medications can temporarily increase their sensitivity to ultraviolet exposure. Some antibiotics, antibacterial agents in soaps and creams, barbiturates and birth control pills can make the skin more susceptible to ultraviolet rays.

Almost all of the estimated 400,000 cases of skin cancer occurring annually are believed to be associated with overexposure to ultraviolet rays from the sun. By far, the majority of skin cancer can be prevented, Dr. McBurney said, if individuals would follow these procedures:

- Avoid sunbathing between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.
- Protect the skin when in the sun by using sunscreen products containing para-aminobenzoic acid or benzophenones.
- Wear wide-brimmed hats, long sleeves and cool, loose-fitting clothing when in the sun for long periods of time.