Sun worshipers need to heed the warning signs of skin cancer

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Staff Writer

With summer just around the corner, students may be rushing into the rays for a golden tan, however, some may be soaking up more than they want.

According to Karen Faul, the cancer help-link nurse at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, students should be concerned about their chances of developing skin cancer.

"About half of the people living to the age of 65 will have had at least one case of skin cancer," said Faul. She explained that 90 percent of the cases of skin cancer people develop is non-melanomic, which is usually on the outer layers of skin and is treatable if detected early. Faul added that melanomic skin cancer is more serious, because it usually fester under the skin.

Faul added that non-melanomic skin cancer generally is caused by over-exposure to the ultra-violet rays from the sun. Cancer is able to develop when these rays cause a sunburn.

"The primary risk factors depend on your type of skin, your age and how often you are exposed to the sun, as well as any family history of skin cancer," said Faul. "People with fair skin who burn easily are at a greater risk, and males are at a greater risk than females."

She added that some people have jobs that put them at greater risk, such as people who are outdoors frequently between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. when ultra-violet rays are strongest and are not blocked by shade.

People who are exposed to coal tar pitch, creosote, radium or arsenic compounds are also at a greater risk of developing skin cancer.

Faul explained that this type of skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. More than 400,000 new cases are diagnosed each year.

"If you want to get a tan, do it gradually," advised Faul. "If you go out for about 15 minutes on either side and do it slowly over a period of time, you won't burn or damage your skin as much. Trying to get a tan all at once is when you'll develop a problem."

Faul added that tanning gradually may not cause cancer, although it does accelerate aging and wrinkling of the skin.

"Some of the symptoms include a sore on the skin that won't heal, or scaly skin," said Faul. "Also a thickening in the skin, or skin that becomes more dense could be skin cancer. If a growth appears that is waxy or pearl-colored, or moles that change in size or color could also be cancerous."

She added that skin cancers of this type usually are not painful or tender. However, if someone notices any of these signs, he or she should see a doctor.

Faul said that if people are concerned about protecting their skin while outside, they should use a sunscreen that is labeled 15 or above. "If you want to get a tan, do it gradually," advised Faul. "If you go out for about 15 minutes on either side and do it slowly over a period of time, you won't burn or damage your skin as much. Trying to get a tan all at once is when you’ll develop a problem."

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She also said that tanning booths or salons are no safer then tanning outdoors. "It is all the same. They all are UV rays," said Faul. "It is just as dangerous." However, a manager at the Tanning Resort, who requested to remain anonymous, said that tanning booths are not as dangerous as tanning in the sun.

"The only difference is the amount of ultra-violet B rays," said the manager. "A higher percentage of B rays is what cause a burn. We use ultra-violet A rays, with a limited dose of UVB. It is a controlled environment, and it is safer."

If one does develop skin cancer, there are varied methods of treatment, according to a pamphlet available at the office of Dr. Daniel Dupree, who is a local dermatologist who treats skin cancer patients. The most popular treatment is curettage and desiccation. The dermatologist extracts the cancer with a curette, an instrument, and then burns the remaining tissue beneath the cancer with an electric needle.

Other treatments include excision surgery, cryosurgery, chemosurgery and radiation. However, according to Faul, prevention is the best method of handling skin cancer.