



FOR PROFESSIONALS
SINCE 1941

PROTECTION AND EARLY DETECTION VITAL TO BEATING SKIN CANCER

13 February 2013: Every year, 20 000 South Africans are affected by skin cancer resulting in more than 700 skin cancer related deaths, according to the National Cancer Registry. As a result, the use of effective sun protection methods and early detection are becoming increasingly important.

This is according to Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, who says there are different forms of skin cancer, of which the most dangerous is the malignant melanoma which may spread to other parts of the body. “Other forms of skin cancer such as the basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas, although they may be disfiguring if requiring surgical removal, do not generally spread but are more common than the melanoma.”

Skin cancers are mostly due to exposure to ultraviolet radiation, says Dr Stott. “Many of the current skin cancer patients were exposed to excessive amounts of sun as children due to South Africans traditionally spending time in the sun unprotected by sun screening lotions, or protective clothing.”

However, not only sunlight but also ultraviolet light from tanning salons has been shown to be an environmental causative factor in the development of skin cancer, says Dr Stott. In a study conducted by the University of California San Francisco involving 7 645 patients with basal cell carcinomas and 1 683 squamous cell carcinomas, the risk of developing basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinomas increased by 29% and 67% respectively when patients were exposed to indoor tanning compared to never having used it.

She says skin cancer cases tend to increase with age due to many years of sun exposure. “To avoid long term skin cancer of any form, people must apply sun screen regularly when in the sun for any reason along with protective clothing, such as swimming tops and hats, in order to help prevent cancer. This is not only important when one is on the beach but also for those who are exposed to sun in their occupation, for example engineers and architects working on site. It is also possible for melanomas to develop in areas not exposed to sunlight such as the nail bed, the mouth or the groin.” Should any darkening of the nail bed develop it would be advisable to have this checked by a medical practitioner.

There are various forms of treatment depending on the type of skin cancer, says Dr Stott. “For the more common forms of skin cancer, a dermatologist may either surgically remove the lesion or prescribe specific creams which will remove them.”

“However, for a melanoma surgical removal is usually performed and because this is a cancer it is typically covered by medical aid. If removed in the early stages then it may be considered cured, however if removed after it has penetrated the deeper layers of skin, then it may have already spread to other parts of the body and require intensive cancer

treatment. There is a 97% chance of a 10 year survival rate when a melanoma has been detected in very early stages when it is very thin, but this survival rate decreases with the increasing depth of the melanoma.”

Whilst the costs of visiting a doctor to have a small skin lesion removed may be minimal, as with all cancers, the more advanced stages of the disease will be very expensive to treat and may have limited success, says Dr Stott.

“Early diagnosis of any skin lesion by a doctor is vital to overcoming skin cancer. Therefore, any existing moles which have changed in colour or size, start ulcerating or bleeding, or grow nodules in them should be regarded as suspicious and seen by a dermatologist immediately. In addition to this, any newly developed darkly pigmented skin lesion must also be investigated. People of all ages are at risk and melanomas in young people have been known to occur.”

For those people who have had previous skin cancers or who are taking precautions, dermatologists can perform ‘skin mapping’ which involves identifying all skin lesions and following them up regularly to identify early those which may need further investigation, says Dr Stott.

“As with all cancers, prevention is better than cure and early detection will improve the success of treatment. Therefore, given the climate of South Africa it is crucial that all citizens take the necessary precautionary measures by using adequate protection and avoiding the use of tanning beds and consult their doctor or dermatologist immediately should any suspicious skin lesions occur,” concludes Dr Stott.

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