



FOR PROFESSIONALS  
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## PROTECTION VITAL AGAINST SKIN CANCER DURING SUMMER SEASON

*17 December 2013:* With the summer season upon us, taking care of your skin should be one of your biggest priorities. According to CANSA, there were 20000 reported cases of skin cancer and 700 deaths. Skin cancer related deaths can be avoided if a few basic rules about protecting yourself against sun exposure are followed.

This is according to Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, who says that effective sun protection is always advisable; “Risk factors for all skin cancers include; fair skin or eyes, freckles and moles, history of sunburn with blistering in childhood and prolonged unprotected exposure to the sun as an adult. Any of these risk factors mean that effective sunscreen (factor 30 or above) and protective clothing needs to be used, regardless of your age.”

She says that even when you have a dark or olive skin tone, the South African sun is so strong that protection is still needed. “It is important to remember that reflected sunlight from e.g. water surfaces, can cause significant sunburn even when not exposed directly to sunlight. Avoiding midday sun from 11am to 2pm is also advised, as this is when the sun’s rays are likely to cause the most damage.”

Dr Stott adds that sun bed tanning is particularly dangerous especially for malignant melanoma due to the type of UV radiation they emit. “Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer and can be fatal. These are more likely to develop in fair skinned individuals with poor tanning ability, especially those with many moles or a history of other skin cancers.”

She says that anyone who has a personal or family history of melanoma or has had other skin cancers, or has had intermittent intense exposure, must have an annual checkup with their doctor. If there are any changes in a mole such as darkening, bleeding or ulceration it must be examined immediately.

Dr Stott says that there are a number of simple things you can do to protect yourself from the sun’s UV radiation. The following are some simple ways to help reduce the risk of contracting skin cancer:

- **Stay out of the sun.** Between 11h00 – 14h00, the sun’s rays are at their strongest. Severe sunburns in childhood or teenage years double the risk of all skin cancers later in life.
- **Wear Sunscreen...** and apply it often. Remember to keep applying the sunscreen onto your skin if you are outdoors for a long time. Read the sunscreen label and follow the directions on reapplying. Most sunscreens are only effective for 40- 80 minutes after water exposure, so it is important that you reapply after getting out of the water.
- **Total Protection.** Look for products with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 to 50. Anything less than SPF 30 has limited benefit while above SPF 50 may be overstating the benefits. In addition, make

sure your sunscreen is broad spectrum; which protects against both UVA and UVB rays. Most products protect you from UVA ultraviolet light activity, which has to do more with causing sunburn, but the UVB rays are actually even more important with regard to skin cancer, so having a sunscreen that protects against both are essential. By using a broad spectrum sunscreen can delay the skin's aging when used over time.

- **Cover up.** If you are thinking about spending the whole day in the sun be sure to cover up. Wear long sleeved tops, large brimmed hats and long pants. While a daily dose of sunshine is important for Vitamin D, this should only be about 15 minutes a day. Any longer and the harsh South African sun can lead to permanent sun damage in the long term.
- **Protect your baby.** Any babies under the age of 6 months should stay out of the sun completely, as their skin is especially sensitive. Sunscreen should also not be used on infants.
- **Avoid tanning beds.** In a study conducted by the University of California San Francisco, 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.

Annual skins checks with a dermatologist are recommended in order to pick up any irregular growths or lesions. According to CANSA, those with more than 50 moles or who have a family history of skin cancer are encouraged to go for skin screenings on a regular basis.

Dr Stott says that even though there are some rare forms of skin cancer that cannot be detected early, most skin cancers can be found early and treated accordingly. "Early detection of cancer will improve the success of treatment.

She says any existing moles that have changed in colour or size, start ulcerating or bleeding, or grow nodules 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."

As with all cancers, prevention is better than cure and early detection will improve the success of treatment, says Dr Stott. "Therefore, taking the necessary precautionary measures by using adequate protection and avoiding the use of tanning beds is crucial to reduce the risk of skin cancer," concludes Dr Stott.