

110° March

What About that Mole?

A Look at the Growing Melanoma Threat and What Balfour Dermatology Is Doing About it

I'm Dr. Robert Beer. This year I am celebrating the 20-year anniversary of my Balfour Dermatology & Day Spa. From the beginning, I have remained particularly committed to helping to protect our community from skin cancers through early detection followed by prompt and effective treatment. We have always offered superior services, products, and procedures on the cosmetic side of the industry. However, our main focus is on diagnosing and treating diseases and conditions of the skin.

I've seen many changes take place in the skin-care industry during my two decades of serving East County residents. One constant change has been a steady growth in the number of skin cancers and the increase of potentially deadly melanomas, in particular. Not only do the number of incidents grow each year, but the rate of increase is itself increasing. The number of melanomas doubled between 1982 and 2011. More than 500 Americans will be diagnosed with melanoma today. There will be 190,000 new cases this year. Melanoma becomes a chronic disease for many people; more than a million of them are currently living with the condition.

The good news is that, because of early detection, melanoma cure rates are rising; the number of deaths has declined even as the number of cases has increased. The five-year survival rate of melanoma with no cells in the lymph nodes has risen to 98%. If lymph nodes are involved, the cure rate is 64%, when the melanoma has metastasized to organs, the survival rate drops to 23. However, the situation isn't as sinister as the numbers indicate. Only 7,000 victims will actually die from the disease this year.

Early detection is responsible for the advance. Specific metrics have made it possible to accurately define the risk. For example, mothers should take steps to protect their children from sunburn, since we now know that a person who experiences five or more blistering sunburns between ages 15 and 20 will increase their melanoma risk factor by 80 percent.

Women have a right to be particularly upset about the increased incidents of melanoma. The condition is sexist and unfair because it affects women more than men. For example, we have always known that tanning beds increase the risk of all skin cancers, including melanoma, but we now know that women 45 years or younger have greater risk from tanning beds than men, and even greater risk than older women. We also know that women between ages 15 to 30 are more susceptible than men to getting

melanoma on their upper backs or torsos. There is increased risk of melanoma on the lower legs, particularly for women.

Exposure to natural light has always been the main risk factor for all skin cancers. Now we have learned that sunlight through windows and even artificial light can also stimulate healthy cells to transform into melanoma cells. Surprisingly, we've learned that the energy emitted by computer screens, and even oxidation from pollution, such as wildfires, can cause melanomas to develop.

Other risk factors for the disease include family history. You should get regular skin exams if your parents, grandparents, siblings, and first cousins had the disease. When there is a history, even children, beginning at age 12, should come in annually for a "mole patrol." The risk factor also increases for people with sensitive skin, or those who burn easily, have red or blond hair, or blue or green eyes. The risk factor also goes up for women with a history of thyroid or breast cancer.

If any of these factors apply to you, come in and get your moles examined.

Early detection is obviously important. More important is taking preventative measures to stop melanoma from developing in the first place. Before any sun-bathed event, liberally apply broad spectrum sunscreen, 30 SPF or higher, to all the exposed areas of your skin. Next generation sunscreen protects have become available to protect you from other sources, as well. We have recently researched sunscreens that can protect from computer blue light and oxidative air pollution. We have installed a Sun Screen Bar at Balfour Dermatology so you can test the various products and choose the right ones for you and/or your family.

The technology part of the business is continually improving. I've always been an early adopter of new skincare technologies. A San Diego lab recently invited me to conduct alpha tests with a revolutionary Star Trek-type diagnostic device that images tissue 450 nanometers below the skin surface. We're the first practice in N. California to get to work with this hand-held appliance that provides a high-resolution image of what's going on with a mole below the actual surface of the skin, enabling us to better analyze the tissue plus more accurately evaluate your moles size and location.

Melanoma is a continually growing and more threatening condition. At Balfour Dermatology it is satisfying to work with processes, medicines, tools, and especially people to continually reduce, and often eliminate, the actual impact of this terrible disease on our patients.

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