



Denita Young
County Extension Agent - FCS
Rains County

May Is Melanoma Prevention and Detection Month

Courtney J. Schoessow, MPH, Extension Program Specialist – Texas AgriLife Extension Service, and Meghan Wernicke have written the following article with life-saving information about melanoma. They have included preventative information that can help you lower your risk of skin cancer. If you need any additional information, please contact me at the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157 or visit our Family and Consumer Sciences website: <http://fcs.tamu.edu/>.

With the hot summer months quickly approaching, May is designated as the national melanoma and skin cancer prevention and detection month. Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer, and the number of new cases diagnosed each year is quickly on the rise in the United States. The good news is that melanoma can be prevented. Too much exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun is the most preventable cause of melanoma and all other types of skin cancers. Do you know anyone who has had melanoma?

The National Cancer Institute estimates that in 2008, there will be a total of 62,480 new cases of melanoma in the United States. Also, 8,420 people are estimated to die from it. Don't let yourself or your family members be a part of these numbers. Learning a few things about melanoma can help you prevent it or find it when it is most easily treated.

Anyone can get melanoma, including people with dark skin. However, people with lighter skin are more likely to develop melanoma than those with dark skin. Also, people who have had severe, blistering sunburns as a child or teenager are more likely to develop melanoma than those who have not had a history of sunburn. These are just a few risk factors, or things that make you more likely to develop melanoma than someone who doesn't have the risk factors.

Several other risk factors for melanoma are: having lots of large, irregular moles or freckles; having fair skin that burns easily (typically people with blonde or red hair and blue eyes); or having a family or personal history of melanoma or other types of skin cancer. We have little control over most of these risk factors, except for excessive exposure to the sun. Sun damage that places you at a higher risk for getting melanoma can be prevented by following a few sun-safety tips. You should avoid too much sun exposure, and try to stay inside between the hours of 10 am and 4 pm when the sun's rays are the most intense. If you have to be outside in the sun, protect your skin with sunglasses, long pants and sleeves, and a sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher. Always protect children from the sun. Children's skin tends to burn more easily than adults, so it is important to keep their skin protected as you teach them lifelong sun-safety habits. Finally, stay out of tanning beds. More and more evidence is beginning to show that the use of tanning beds can cause melanoma, along with other forms of skin cancer and premature skin aging.

Finally, it is important to be aware of what your skin looks like so you can observe changes to help detect melanoma early. If you notice a changing mole, a new mole, or a mole that is different,

see your doctor as soon as possible. Examine your moles and freckles regularly using the ABCDE rules to look for the warning signs of melanoma. A is for **A**symmetry - one half of the mole does not match the other half. B is for **B**order irregularity - the edges of the mole are ragged, notched, or blurred. C is for **C**olor - the color of the mole is not the same all over. There may be shades of tan, brown or black or dashes of red, white or blue. D is for **D**iameter - the mole is bigger than about ¼ inch across (about the size of a pencil eraser).

E is for **E**volving - changes in a mole's size, shape, color, elevation, texture, or the occurrence of a new symptom such as bleeding, itching, or crusting. If you have a mole or freckle that you think meets one of the ABCDE criteria, show it to your doctor as soon as possible.

For more information and pictures of what abnormal moles may look like, please consult:

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/melanoma> or

<http://www.skincancer.org/melanoma/index.php>. Texas AgriLife Extension Service and Texas Cancer Council encourage you and your family to practice sun-safe habits this summer and throughout the year, and to examine your skin regularly to report any suspicious moles to your doctor.

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