

Misunderstandings About Sun and Melanoma

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Summer is finally here in the northern states and the sun is shining – at least on some days. Every day that I can, I lay out in the sun and tan for a bit. Everyone should make sure to expose as much of the body as possible to sunlight (shorts and a tank top or a bathing suit work best), and to get a tan every year.

The biggest reason that people don't do this? Fear of skin cancer. The sunscreen industry has brainwashed people into thinking that sun exposure is dangerous, which of course, creates demand for sunscreen. Manufacturers of Vitamin D supplements have convinced people that they don't need the sun – they can take vitamin D in pills instead.

None of this is true. While there has been an increase in the diagnosis of skin cancer, death rates have not increased significantly, and sun is not the main cause of these diagnoses. And vitamin D in pills is not the same as the vitamin D your body makes in response to sunlight.

The Definition of Skin Cancer

According to an article in the *British Journal of Dermatology*, there is an epidemic of *overdiagnosis*, not an epidemic of *skin cancer*, which is due to a phenomenon known as diagnostic drift. Panic about skin cancer leads to more and more screening, which then leads to increased diagnoses of more benign disease. In fact, the researchers reported that almost the entirety of the increase in the incidence of skin cancer was due to diagnoses of minimal stage 1 disease. They wrote, "There was no change in the combined incidence of other states of the disease, and the overall mortality only increased from 2.16 to 2.54 cases per 100,000 per year."

The researchers further reported that the location most of these lesions did not correspond to the sites of lesions caused by sun exposure, and concluded "These findings should lead to a reconsideration of the treatment of 'early' lesions, a search for better diagnostic methods to distinguish them from truly malignant melanomas, re-evaluation of the role of ultraviolet radiation and recommendations for protection from it, as well as the need for a new direction in the search for the cause of melanoma."¹

What this means is that skin cancer is like other cancers – too much testing leads to the diagnosis of abnormalities that are not really cancer. These abnormalities are labeled as cancer anyway, and they are treated like cancer. This is very profitable for medical institutions, doctors, and drug companies – not so great for patients.

This Situation is Not New

The article cited above was published over ten years ago in 2009, and still today nothing has changed. "Experts" still claim that melanoma is caused by sun exposure and people are still slathering themselves with sunscreen when they spend time outdoors and they are still taking vitamin D. People are still seeing doctors who screen for and find non-cancerous lesions, who then tell patients they have skin cancer, and instruct them to stay out of the sun.

The Real Truth About Skin Cancer and Vitamin D

As with so many medical issues, the truth is actually the opposite of what people are told. Avoiding the sun is a risk factor for all-cause mortality of similar magnitude as smoking. And smokers who had the most sun exposure at age 60 had a two-year increased life expectancy than smokers who avoided sun.²

Furthermore, vitamin D pills are not a substitute.³ A study of MS patients and controls showed that increased sun exposure led to less neurodegeneration, increased gray matter volume and whole brain volume independent of vitamin D levels. The researchers concluded that MS patients may be better off with lower vitamin D levels and sun exposure than higher vitamin D levels from supplementation.⁴

What does cause skin cancer if it is not the sun? The usual suspects – diet, hydration, weight status, inflammation levels, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, sleep, rest, stress and exercise habits.

One point on which we all agree: sunburn is harmful, so pace yourself, start with minimal sun exposure and increase carefully over time. But do get out in the sun – humans need sunlight just as they need food and water and rest.

¹ Levell NJ, Beattie CC, Shuster S, Greenberg DC. "Melanoma epidemic: a midsummer night's dream?" *Br J Dermatol* 2009 Sep;161(3):630-634

² Lindqvist P, Epstein E, Nielsen K, Landin-Olsson M, Ingvar C, Olsson H. "Avoidance of sun exposure as a risk factor for major causes of death: a competing risk analysis of the Melanoma in Southern Sweden cohort." *J Intern Med*. 2016 Oct;280(4):375-87

³ Wolpowitz D, Gilchrist B. "The vitamin D questions: how much do you need and how should you get it?" *J Am Acad Dermatol*. 2006 Feb;54(2):301-17

⁴ Zivadinov R, Treu C, Weinstock-Guttman B, et al. "Interdependence and contributions of sun exposure and vitamin D to MRI measures in multiple sclerosis." *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2013 Oct;84(10):1075-1081