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things you don't know about skin cancer

BY BARBARA BRODY

Your genes matter...a lot.

If you live to age 65, there's a 40% to 50% chance that you'll end up with some type of skin cancer. Sun exposure is primarily to blame, but mom and dad are also on the hook. Experts suspect that most people who get skin cancer have some genetic predisposition to the disease. "In patients who are highly susceptible, very little or no UV light exposure may be needed for cells to turn into skin cancer," says Joshua Zeichner, MD, director of cosmetic and clinic research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in NYC. "In other people, cells can tolerate significant amounts of UV damage before they transform." What's more, about 14% of melanomas have nothing to do with UV exposure, which is why it's possible to get the disease in places where the sun literally doesn't shine, like your buttocks or the soles of your feet. So, yes, sunscreen matters, but so does your family history. If relatives have had skin cancer, talk to your dermatologist about how frequently you should be screened.

Hair: Virginia Le Fay. Makeup: Colleen Stone. Manicure: Donna for Artists by Timothy Priano. Wardrobe styling: Dani Parets for Creative Management @ MC2.

90% of skin aging is caused by the sun.

Your glass of pinot grigio might raise your risk.

People who have a daily glass of white wine are 13% more likely to develop melanoma, according to an in-depth study of Caucasians published in *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers, and Prevention*. The research linking melanoma and alcohol consumption in general was especially strong in areas of the body that get less sun exposure. “Wine tends to have higher levels of acetaldehyde, a carcinogen, compared to other alcohol types,” says Debra Jaliman, MD, a New York City-based dermatologist. While red wine has the same DNA-damaging compound, it also contains extra antioxidants that may counteract it. Jaliman says most people can still enjoy alcohol on occasion, but moderation is best. And if you already have other skin cancer risk factors (such as a family history or being very fair-skinned), ask your doctor if it would be better to abstain.

Frequent fliers should get screened more often.

Pilots and flight attendants are twice as likely as those in other professions to develop melanoma—and it’s probably not because they’re relaxing on the beach during layovers. The most likely explanation is that they routinely receive higher-than-average doses of both UV rays and cosmic radiation, a potentially harmful kind that originates in outer space. Cosmic radiation increases with elevation, so the higher you fly, the more you soak up. What’s more, while airplane windshields and cabin windows generally filter out some UVA and UVB rays, levels of these types of radiation are also higher at flying altitudes. “UVA light in particular penetrates deeper into the skin, and is associated with collagen damage and skin aging as well as the development of skin cancers,” says Zeichner. He suggests re-applying sunscreen before heading to the airport and lowering your window shade to minimize exposure. Meanwhile, frequent fliers would be wise to see their derms for semi-annual skin checks.

Doctors are better at catching—and treating—it.

Nowadays more people than ever before are being diagnosed with skin cancer, but this is actually good news, says Jaliman. “Incidence is going up, however, it’s probably because there’s increased detection,” she explains. In other words, docs are diagnosing skin cancer in its earliest stages, when it’s highly treatable. Melanoma has a 98% survival rate if it’s caught before it spreads. Even advanced skin cancer can be treated with new immunotherapy medications, which supercharge certain components of a patient’s immune system to destroy cancer cells and help them live longer.



The Sunny Side of the Sun

Catching a few rays can be good for your health because:

It boosts your mood.

Moderate exposure to bright sunlight helps your brain ramp up production of the feel-good chemical serotonin—yet another great reason to spend more time outdoors.

It keeps your body clock running smoothly.

Sunlight ensures that your circadian rhythms stay on track. Sleep experts often advise that insomniacs get some sun first thing in the morning by having breakfast near a window or going for a brisk walk.

It treats certain diseases.

UV rays have been proven to help clear up skin conditions like eczema and psoriasis. If you have one of these conditions, talk to your doctor about how much sunshine you need so you don’t overdo it.