

GRAND RIVER LIFE

WHAT TO SEE AND DO THIS WEEK

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SECTION G

Dark side of the sun

Skin cancer risk rising among sun worshippers young and old

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Even when two family doctors dismissed her concern that the tiny white spot on her nose might be cancer, Trudy Metzger wasn't convinced. It was January 2003, and the Drayton woman was just 33 years old when she noticed an area, not bigger than the lead tip of a pencil, on the bridge of her nose near her eye.

Soon after, her father died and she was too busy to have the spot checked. Then, two months later, her baby son accidentally scratched it.

"It bled like crazy," Metzger recalled.

After six to eight weeks, it still hadn't healed, but her family doctor said it was just a scratch.

"He said, 'Don't worry,' but in my gut it felt wrong."

She found another family doctor and, like his predecessor, he was excellent with her children, but dismissed her concerns about the spot.

It was only when she told her mother that she

learned three of her aunts and one uncle had developed basal cell skin cancer. The uncle had ignored a lesion for 10 years and required both chemotherapy and radiation.

She approached her doctor again, who sent her to a plastic surgeon in Kitchener. He diagnosed basal cell cancer through a biopsy and, in June of that year, surgically removed an area nearly as large as a dime to make sure all surrounding cancer cells were gone.

Now Metzger urges people to be vigilant. "Watch your skin and what's not normal, don't let them convince you it's normal. Go back until you get answers. If you're not the type to push, find somebody who cares about you who will."

Metzger's doctors told her a combination of family history and sun exposure led to her cancer. But she feels sun was the main culprit, since she lived in Mexico for the first five years of her life and was always outside.

She now sees Waterloo dermatologist Dr. Ken Kobayashi for twice-yearly followups.

Kobayashi, in his role as a regional representa-

tive for the Canadian Dermatology Association's sun awareness program, recently issued a warning about the rising incidence of basal cell cancer in young people.

This most common and most treatable skin cancer has traditionally appeared in people over 50, but is increasingly showing up in those in their teens and 20s, said Kobayashi, who has had half a dozen patients 30 or younger with basal cells in the last five years.

"It doesn't seem like a lot, but I'm one of six dermatologists in the Waterloo-Wellington region," he said. Exposure to increasingly strong ultraviolet rays through the thinning ozone layer and the rising popularity of indoor tanning parlours has led to the rise, he said.

"People still like to have a tan because they think a tan looks good and it's associated with looking healthier or feeling more relaxed," said Kobayashi. "We need to get the message out that a tan is actually a sign of sun damage on your skin." For people who insist on darker skin, tanning creams and sprays are a safer option, he said, but they don't remove the need for sunscreen.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DIANE SHANTZ,
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SUN-SENSE GUIDELINES

It is possible to enjoy healthy outdoor activities while in the sun. The Canadian Dermatology Association recommends the following:

✱ Reduce sun exposure between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are at their strongest. This period is easy to recognize because your shadow is shorter than you are.

✱ Seek shade or create your own shade, especially when you are outside between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. Be prepared for places that don't have shade by taking along an umbrella.

✱ Slip on clothing to cover your arms

and legs, protecting skin from the sun. Choose clothing that is loose fitting, tightly woven and lightweight.

✱ Wear a wide-brimmed hat that covers your head, face, ears and neck. Most skin cancers occur on the face and neck, so this area needs extra protection. Hats without a wide brim, such as baseball caps, do not give you enough protection.

✱ Slop on a sunscreen with SPF (sun

protection factor) 15 or higher. Look for SPF 30 if you work outdoors or if you will be outside for most of the day. And look for "broad spectrum" on the label. This means that the sunscreen offers protection against two types of ultraviolet rays, UVA and UVB.

✱ Apply sunscreen generously 20 minutes before outdoor activities. Reapply often — at least every two hours — and after swimming or exercise that makes you perspire. No sun-

screen can absorb all of the sun's rays. Use sunscreen along with shade, clothing and hats, not instead of them.

✱ Keep babies out of the direct sun. Children under one year need extra protection because their skin is very sensitive. Keep your child's stroller, playpen or carriage in the shade.

✱ Tanning salons and sunlamps are not a safe way to tan. No tan is a safe tan—a tan is evidence of sun damage.



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