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Dermatology focuses on the largest organ of the human body: the skin. A complicated system tasked with a multitude of functions, the skin is comprised of three layers: the epidermis, the dermis and the subcutis.

The epidermis is the top, visible layer of skin and works to protect the deeper layers and organs. The much-thicker dermis is the middle layer, housing hair shafts, sweat glands, blood vessels and nerves. The deepest layer is the subcutis, which protects the organs from injury and helps the body maintain a constant temperature by holding in heat.

Maintaining healthy skin is an ongoing, life-long process that many overlook until the damage is done.

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Know the Skin You're In

Experts agree that one of the best tools for maintaining healthy skin is awareness. Know which spots and bumps are normal for your body—and which signal the need for a medical professional's attention.

Self-inspection is an effective, easy, painless and free way to detect skin cancer in its earliest stages, when it is highly treatable. Experts suggest that it be done at least once every three months.

Some tips for a successful inspection

- Become familiar with the unique features of your body (moles, for example). This will make it easier to immediately recognize any changes and describe them accurately to a physician.
- Look at every inch of skin. Don't forget about the back of the neck, legs and arms, as well as the scalp and bottoms of feet. Use full-length and hand mirrors or ask a family member to help inspect hard-to-see areas (such as the back).
- Look for changes in the size, shape, color or feel of birthmarks, moles and spots. Also keep an eye out for any lumps, unusual or non-healing sores or changes in the way the skin looks or feels. If any of these signs are spotted during a self-exam—or if anything unusual is found on the skin—see a doctor immediately.

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Skin Cancer

Cancer is a condition in which the body's cells begin to reproduce out of control. Cancer can occur in virtually any part of the body, including the largest organ, the skin. Virtually all skin cancers are curable if diagnosed and treated early. That's great news when you consider that skin cancer is the most common of all cancers, accounting for roughly half of the more than 1.5 million cancer cases diagnosed each year.

"Skin cancer" is used as a broad term for different varieties, divided into two general categories: nonmelanoma and melanoma.

Nonmelanoma Skin Cancer

While there are many types of nonmelanoma skin cancers, the most common are basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma.

Between 75 and 80 percent of all diagnosed skin cancer is basal cell carcinoma. A slow-growing cancer, it is highly unusual for it to spread to other parts of the body. Basal cell carcinoma is usually found in the body parts that suffer the most exposure to the sun: the ears, face, scalp, neck, shoulders and back.

Squamous cell carcinomas are found in the outermost layers of skin. If not attended to, it can spread to other areas of the body where they become much harder to treat. Approximately 16 percent of each year's cases are diagnosed as squamous cell carcinomas.

With early detection and prompt treatment, both forms boast a cure rate of better than 95 percent.

Melanoma Skin Cancer

Much less common than nonmelanoma skin cancer, melanoma can be far more serious if untreated. Although only four percent of all skin cancer cases are diagnosed as melanoma, it accounts for more than 77 percent of all skin cancer deaths.

Because melanoma is particularly difficult to treat once it has spread to other parts of the body, early detection is critical. Anyone who spends time in the sun is at risk for melanoma. Therefore, everyone should know the warning signs.

Melanoma tumors are usually brown or black and result from uncontrolled growth of the pigment-producing cells, often in existing moles. How can you tell if a mole is a normal, healthy one or one that may be cancerous? Dermatologists recommend that you inspect any moles regularly using the "ABCD" approach:

A: Asymmetry — Both sides of the mole should follow a similar pattern.

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B: Border — Moles with ragged or irregular edges should be inspected by a medical professional.

C: Color — Each mole should be one color. Moles with varying shades of brown, tan or black, or any with red patches, are cause for concern.

D: Diameter — Be wary of any mole more than one-quarter inch (6 mms) in diameter.

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Sun Protection

The minutes you spend in the sun accumulate over a lifetime and even when the skin doesn't burn, the damage that is done is permanent. The best protection is no sun exposure—an unrealistic option for most people. Daily application of sunscreen is the next-best protection against skin aging and cancers.

Sunscreens

Sunscreens all list an "SPF" number. SPF stands for "sun protection factor." The SPF number is determined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA, based on laboratory testing).

SPF works by increasing the time it takes for unprotected skin to burn when exposed to the sun. The number works as a multiple—to determine the amount of protection, multiply the time unprotected skin would normally take to burn by the SPF number. For example, if a person burns after 10 minutes in the sun, an SPF of 15 means they will burn after 150 minutes instead. Protection increases with the number, which can be as high as 60.

Of course, sun protection is only as good as its application. The FDA recommends that sunscreen be applied liberally to all exposed areas at least 20 minutes before going into the sun and again 20 minutes later. To maintain protection, sunscreen should be reapplied at least every two hours—and immediately after exiting water or excessive sweating.

A minimum SPF of 15 should be used every day, not just when participating in outdoor activities. Sunscreen should be applied everywhere, including the back of the neck, tops of feet (if wearing open shoes), the nose, ears and exposed areas of the scalp. Sunscreens lose their effectiveness over time. A good rule of thumb is to buy new sunscreen each year.

Note: Sunscreen should never be applied to children younger than six months old—protect these very young infants by preventing direct exposure to the sun. Apply sunscreen to all children older than six months every time they are in the sun.

Preventive Behavior

In addition to daily use of sunscreen, the American Academy of Dermatology offers these tips for preventing sun damage.

- Avoid being in direct sunlight between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are most intense and can do the most damage.
- Wear protective clothing, such as loose, long-sleeved shirts, hats with brims and long pants.
- Do not sunbathe or use tanning products.
- Don't let winter's cool months fool you: sun damage can happen

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any time of year. In fact, the sun can reflect off snow and ice, increasing exposure and damage.
– Wear sunglasses to protect the eyes and the surrounding delicate tissues.

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