

Feature

Danielle Lett tells you what to look out for in this common form of cancer

As we approach warmer weather, coupled with the continued easing of lockdown restrictions, it's gearing up to be an exciting time of year.

But as people look forward to the prospect of meeting their loved ones outside and heading out for some sensible fun in the sun, it's important to remember the risks that come with sunshine.

Skin cancer is one of the most common types of cancer, with around 147,000 new cases of non-melanoma skin cancer and 16,000 new cases of melanoma skin cancer diagnosed annually.

But what are the signs, how can you prevent it, and what should you do if you think you could be at risk?

Dr Peter Holloway (below), a Mendlesham-based GP and cancer lead for Ipswich and East Suffolk CCG, is here to answer all of your questions.

Firstly though, it's important to understand the difference between the two types of skin cancer – malignant melanoma, and non-melanoma.

"Malignant melanoma is the much more serious form of skin cancer, while the two non-melanoma types are basal cell skin cancer (BCC) and squamous cell skin cancer (SCC). The latter are cancers that do not spread, so are not life-threatening, whereas the former is the more dangerous cancer," explains Dr Holloway.

Most skin cancers are caused by sun exposure - whether this is over a long period of time or a short, intense burst. This is due to the ultraviolet light that comes from the sun damaging the DNA within the skin's cells.

There are also a number of factors that can heighten your risk of developing skin cancer. These include having pale skin, having blonde or ginger hair, having blue eyes, having a large number of moles or freckles, having an area of skin previously damaged by burning or radiotherapy treatment, taking medicines that suppress your immune system, and previous skin cancer diagnoses.

Age is also a factor, with those who are 75 and above more at risk of developing melanoma and

non-melanoma cancers - but skin cancer can affect those of all ages.

So, what does skin cancer look like, and what are the main signs to look out for?

"Essentially, any new sore, ulcer or lump in the skin that persists for more than four weeks should be a cause for concern, as well as any moles or freckles that change in any way," says Dr Holloway.

He recommends using the 'ABCD' method when examining any moles or freckles.

'A' refers to 'asymmetry' – are the two halves of the mole shaped differently?

'B' is for 'border' - is the edge of the mole or freckle irregular, or changing in shape?

'C' is for 'colour' - uneven colouring could be a cause for concern.

'D' stands for 'diameter' - any changes in shape, size of diameter to your mole should be reported to your GP.

Dr Holloway urges anyone who feels they may be showing any possible signs of skin cancer to get it checked immediately.

"People may be worried about bothering their GP at the moment, but at Ipswich Hospital we've developed a new teledermatology service where you can send in images of any moles or skin lesions, so they can be virtually assessed by a consultant very quickly."

The service will allow patients to send in smartphone photos which will be assessed by a GP, who will then determine if a face-to-face appointment is necessary. This aims to reduce the number of patients who may need to visit the hospital during the pandemic and beyond.

To help lower your risk of developing skin cancer in the first place however, there are a number of steps you can take.

"Essentially, reducing your sun exposure is the best way to do this – being especially vigilant between 11am and 3pm as these are the peak times when we get the most ultraviolet radiation. So ensure you cover your skin at those times," says Dr Holloway.

The NHS recommends using a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 or above, applying liberally on any areas of skin exposed to the sun. Sunscreen should be applied 30 minutes before heading out into the sun, and

reapplied every two hours.

To ensure



adequate coverage, adults should use around two teaspoons of sunscreen if you're covering just your head, arms and neck, or two tablespoons if you're covering your entire body while wearing a swimming costume.

However, it is important to remember to not just rely on sunscreen alone, covering your skin where possible with suitable clothing and hats.

"Something that is often overlooked is to make sure you wear sunglasses. These protect not only your eyes themselves, but the sensitive skin around them where a lot of squamous cell skin cancers can arise," he adds.

It should be noted that total avoidance of the sun is just as unhealthy as overexposure, with Dr Holloway adding: "There is a balance to be struck, as we need a certain amount of sun exposure to make sure we have adequate vitamin D levels," he says.

Vitamin D is crucial for a

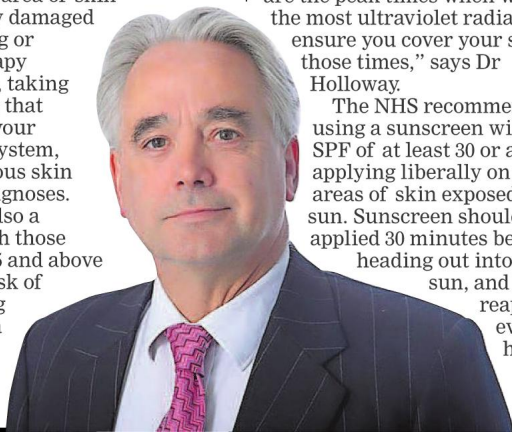
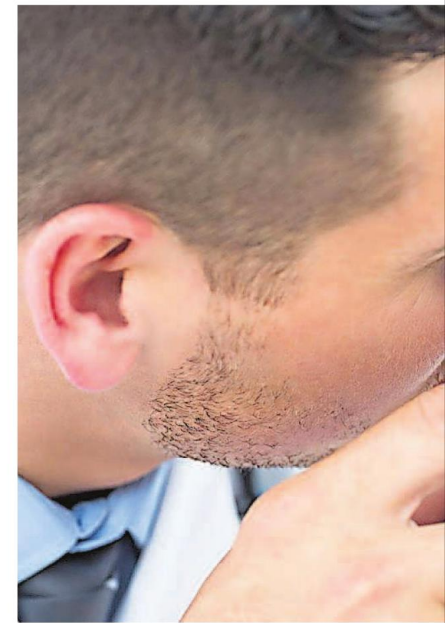
number of reasons, including keeping your bone, muscle and nervous system healthy. A lack of vitamin D and sunlight can lead to fatigue, bone deformities and rickets.

"The amount of direct sunlight we need for these is quite small though, and equates to around 10 minutes a day," he says.

As well as reducing your exposure to natural sunlight, it is also important to remember that sunbeds also lead to a high risk of developing skin cancer.

"They're as harmful as the sun, as it's still ultraviolet radiation, and regular use of sunbeds increases your chance of serious melanoma skin cancer by about 20%. Sunbeds are an extremely bad idea and usage of them are not to be recommended at all."

If you have any concerns about skin cancer, visit www.esneft.nhs.uk or www.cancerresearchuk.org to find out more.

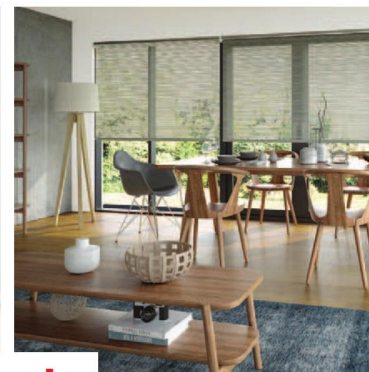




Above, as well as using regularly using sunscreen, the sun should be avoided between 11am and 3pm as that is when it's at its strongest

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Left, any changes to your moles should be checked out by your GP



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