



are you really sun smart?

We found top dermatologists to field your questions. Read on for total skin-care coverage.

BY CAROLINE HWANG

Q If skin cancer is caused by the sun, why does my doctor check parts of my body that never see the light of day?

A Two reasons. First, while UV exposure is strongly linked to both nonmelanoma and melanoma cancers, it isn't the only cause. "Genes play a role, particularly with malignant melanoma, which can develop internally," says Albert M. Lefkovits, M.D., a dermatologist and associate clinical professor at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. "There are also factors, like medical conditions or treatments that suppress the immune system, that make you more susceptible to skin cancer." Second, there's the likelihood that you only think certain parts of your body are always covered. Your swimsuit probably doesn't have a very high SPF, or it may be skimpier than you know.

Q Is there a certain age when a lifetime's worth of sun exposure shows itself?

A Basically, it takes about 20 years for sun damage, aka signs of premature aging, to make its appearance. But exactly when you'll start seeing it depends on how big a sun lover you were (and are) and at what age you got started. "I've seen wrinkling and rough and dry skin patches in women as young as 30," says Dr. Lefkovits. "They tend to be people who were lifeguards as teens or who went to college or high school in places like Florida and Arizona." But even with less exposure, you may already have seen subtle sun-related changes in your skin. Certainly, this is true if you're no stranger to tan lines. "Think about the skin on your chest that's covered by your bikini top. I bet it's a lot softer than the skin just inches away from it," notes Dr. Lefkovits.

Q I haven't always been careful about sunscreen, and I've been known to lie out in the sun. Can I reverse whatever skin damage I've done?

A Yes. First and foremost, stop tanning, says Dr. Herman. Second, get better about wearing sunscreen. Finally, there's an array of treatments, including over-the-counter creams (like Retinol), prescription preparations (such as Retin-A or Tazorac), chemical peels and laser therapy. These work by exfoliating the top layers of skin, which have the most damage. The topical creams also contain antiaging compounds (such as retinoic acid or alpha-hydroxy acid in the prescription preparations, or their derivatives in the OTC ones), which actually repair the damaged DNA. Want something low-tech? "Drink a cup or more of green tea every day," says Dr. Lefkovits. "It's a powerful antioxidant, and studies have shown it to counter the free-radical damage caused by UV." •