



## SCARED SUNLESS By BRADEN KEIL

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I can't help but get a little nervous when "Here Comes the Sun" starts playing on the radio. May is "Melanoma Awareness Month" - which I wouldn't have given a second thought to this time last year.

But last December was my melanoma awareness month, when I was diagnosed with the potentially fatal, but often preventable, skin disease. The American Cancer Society estimates that about 59,940 new melanoma patients will be diagnosed in the U.S. in 2007. Half of those, like me, will be under 57 years old. And more than 8,000 will die.

For years, I half-noticed an oddly shaped mole on my back no bigger than a nickel. One friend who saw it poolside almost a decade ago suggested I have it checked out. So did some family members, since my younger and fairer-skinned sister was treated for skin cancer in the 1980s.

But I never had the time to see a dermatologist.

Then, last fall, I noticed in a dressing room mirror that the mole had turned darker and was slightly sensitive to the touch.

At the insistence of my wife, I reluctantly went to see Dr. Albert Lefkovits, a Park Avenue dermatologist and an associate clinical professor of dermatology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. I was told that, to be safe, I should schedule a biopsy the next day.

During the 20-minute procedure, Lefkovits said that he was going to remove the entire mole and the some of the bordering skin. "I thought I'd be conservative and just remove it all," he said at the time, before closing it with 15 stitches. "I'm pretty sure I got all of it."

When I returned to have the bandages changed the next day, he came into the room with a solemn expression and said the chilling words that no one is ever quite prepared to hear: "The test was positive for a malignancy.

"We have to consider the possibility that the cancer has spread," explained Lefkovits. "I want to make sure you make it to your kids' weddings."

My children are 1 and 3 years old. Suddenly I had doubts I'd see them enter grade school.

The next feeling I had was anger - that I let a condition slowly become a dangerous situation, when all the time it could've been prevented. I was never a sun worshipper. But after four decades of fun in the sun While using only the occasional smattering of sunscreen, my skin was finally turning on me.

Lefkovits said my cancer had to do with a combination of factors: my fair, half-Irish skin; a history of skin cancer in my family; not using sunscreen of at least SPF 30 (or not using it often enough); and not getting an annual exam.

Following a battery of often painful tests, including a lengthy CAT scan and PET scans - with a nuclear dye injected into my veins - I entered New York University Hospital for major surgery. In all, I had more than 80 stitches in my back and under my left arm. It wasn't until the next week that I found out the operation had been a success.

Since then, Lefkovits has removed four other suspect moles, three of which were in the early stages of cancer. "Once you get it, you're more susceptible to a recurrence," he says.