

## Skin Check

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**THE SKIN IS THE LARGEST ORGAN OF OUR BODY AND LIVING IN CENTRAL TEXAS DEFINITELY TAKES ITS TOLL.** Whether it is the long commute on Mopac and I-35, a day at the lake, or a weekend on the coast, we all are exposed to more than our fair share of the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Ultraviolet (UV) light is present even on cloudy days and passes right through windows — especially car windows. UV light causes microscopic damage to the DNA in our skin cells. Overtime, this damage multiplies and can lead to dangerous and even deadly skin cancers (not to mention the increase in wrinkles and brown spots). In fact, over half of us will get a skin cancer in our lifetime. Most skin cancers tend to grow slowly; if they are caught early, there is a better chance of easily removing them without problems. However, if these cancers are left unchecked, they can be very disfiguring and could spread to internal organs. Some of these skin cancers can even be fatal. Prevention, early diagnosis and treatment are the keys to lowering your risk.

Preventing the damage from the sun is first and foremost and can be accomplished through simple sun protection techniques. First, whenever possible, avoid being outside during mid day sun (the peak exposure hours). Next, when you have to be outside, sunscreens (minimum of SPF 30) should be applied daily to sun exposed areas to prevent the damage that we get day-in-day-out (your make-up doesn't count). When we are out in the sun for extended periods, sunscreen should be re-applied every 2 hours because it loses its effectiveness over time due to sweat and deactivation. SPF clothing is another form of prevention. This clothing can now be easily found online and in retail stores; it is a great investment for those of us that spend a lot of time outdoors, like avid golfers or tennis players.

The next important aspect of taking care of your skin is early diagnosis. Skin cancers come in several different shapes and sizes. Non-melanoma skin cancers are the most common types of skin cancers; these usually occur on sun damaged skin and appear after the early 30's but can occur earlier. Hard to find sometimes when they are small, these cancers are often places that bleed or don't seem to heal. If left for long periods of time these cancers can find their way beyond the skin and may spread through the body. Melanoma skin cancers, although more rare, are the most dangerous types. Melanoma can occur anywhere on the body (even the scalp and soles of the feet). Melanomas affect people of all ages. Recently, high levels of tanning bed use have led to a large increase in melanomas in young women. These cancers are typically dark, almost black, spots that



can grow either from an existing mole or can arise from nowhere. The warning signs for these type of spots can easily be remembered with A (asymmetry), B (irregular borders), C (multiple colors), D (diameter bigger than a pencil eraser) and E (evolution = change over time). Melanomas are the most aggressive of skin cancers and are very dangerous if untreated. Despite recent advances in therapy, Melanoma is very difficult to treat once it invades beyond the skin. Unfortunately, invasive melanoma has high rates of mortality. So, it is important to see your dermatologist if you notice anything unusual or different.

The best way to find these cancers early and learn the signs is to find a Board-Certified Dermatologist. Current recommendations by the American Academy of Dermatology and the Skin Cancer Foundation say that individuals should be screened for skin cancer yearly by a physician and should self screen monthly. During this yearly exam, current moles and sun damage are evaluated closely. From this exam patients can better understand what to look for when doing self exams. Also, having a yearly exam lowers your risk of missing a skin cancer for an extended period of time. People at high risk, such as those with a history of melanoma, are often seen even more frequently. By staying ahead, you can lower your risk of having a problem in the future. The small amount of time taken to introduce healthy skin habits may save your life (not to mention keeping you looking younger).

*Kyle Coleman, MD is a Board Certified Dermatologist with Westlake Dermatology & Cosmetic Surgery. Westlake Dermatology provides the very latest in skin rejuvenation and cosmetic and plastic surgery as well as state-of-the-art treatment for diseases of the skin. The practice of dermatology continues to be one of the fastest growing medical specialties with ongoing breakthroughs in skin care and repair. Westlake Dermatology patients have access to the most current medical technology and therapies available for lifelong healthy skin at any age.*