Green industry workers on collision course with cancer

Many of us are at great risk and don't even know it.

The hazard: cancer.

No, it's unlikely the danger is caused by exposure to any of the chemicals we work with. Much, much more likely, what will cause our cancer is something we consider to be the best part of the turf/landscape business—working outdoors.

Skin cancer (there are several different kinds) is one of the biggest health risks we face. Why? Because most of us are exposed to skin-damaging ultraviolet radiation day after day, and we take no precautions.

More than 600,000 new cases of non-melanoma skin cancer are reported each year in the United States. The National Cancer Institute says that as many as 30 percent of people in the South will develop non-melanoma skin cancer at some point in their life, about 15 percent in the North. These numbers astonish me.

Even now they astonish me—even after a skin specialist removed a solar keratoses from my right temple which, as far as can be determined, was pre-cancerous.

“Would what happen if I didn't get this taken care of?” I ask the doctor.

“It would just get worse.”

“How'd I get it?”

“Too much sun. It's not all that uncommon. Actually, it's in a good place. It could have been on your nose.”

I've since learned that several friends have had similar experiences; some, in fact, more serious than mine.

I've also learned that solar keratoses are probably the least threatening manifestations of cancer. There are other forms, and some can become life-threatening if not detected and treated soon enough.

Basal cell carcinoma, for instance, is a slow-growing cancer that rarely spreads to other parts of the body. It’s the most common type of skin cancer. Squamous cell carcinomas are faster growing tumors and sometimes spread to other organs. Together, these two types of cancers are known as “non-melanoma skin cancers” to distinguish them from melanoma of the skin, a more serious form of cancer yet.

There isn't enough room in this column to give you more detailed information. Contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society. They'll be glad to supply you with literature, photographs, and other material.

Until then, share this information about the risks of skin cancer with co-workers and employees.

It should be a part of the safety training of all lawn/landscape professionals, considering the number of shirtless, hatless workers I see mowing or working on clients' landscapes.

Usually these workers are white males. Although no race is immune to skin cancer, this segment of the population is most likely to develop a skin cancer, says the American Cancer Society.

To reduce the risk of becoming one of the 2,500 Americans who die each year of non-melanoma skin cancers: wear hats and appropriate clothing, and use sunscreen (SPF 15 or more) when working outdoors.

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