

You Are at Risk

By Tom Schwab, Manager, O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility, University of Wisconsin-Madison

I stopped by a skin cancer-screening booth at the GCSAA National Convention a few years ago. I did this because, as my co-workers remind me daily, I am getting older. I'm noticing little spots on my skin and was curious if some of these may be early signs of skin cancer. I've worked outdoors for my whole career and have rarely, until recently, worn sunscreen. This, I would venture to say, is a typical story for many of you. Even now I don't wear it enough because it weakens during the day or I get too busy to reapply when it washes off. There are as many excuses as there are sunscreens on the shelf.

I'm writing this article to ask you to please wear more sunscreen, make it available to your employees, get your kids in the habit of wearing it, and consider wearing more long sleeved shirts and long pants. People do seem to be more aware of skin cancer of late because I notice many more full brimmed hats and sunglasses than I used to see.

Yes --- sunglasses are important too, because skin cancer can even start in your eyes. That is why doctors recommend wearing sunglasses that block out at least 99% of both Ultra Violet A and UV B rays.

All the facts stated in this article are directly from three booklets that I picked up at that cancer-screening booth. The booklets are "What You Need To Know About Melanoma," from the National

Cancer Institute, "Skin Cancer, The Bare Facts" by W.R. Spence, MD, and "For Every Child Under The Sun," from the Skin Cancer Foundation.

Another fact from the booklets is that the sun is the cause of at least 90% of all skin cancers. Thus skin cancer is preventable by taking several precautionary obvious steps of using sunscreen and covering up more. Another fact is that the average person receives about 75% of their lifetime sun exposure after age 18, for example guess who – those of us in the green industry that make a livelihood in the sun. That still leaves 25% that get most of their sun exposure before age 18. That is why it's important to teach kids good sun-protection practices. It's just as important as wearing seat belts or not playing with fire. Although it's not as obvious since effects from the sun may not be apparent for 20 to 30 years.

Damage to the skin from sunburns or tanning accumulates over years. Did you know tanned skin is a sign of skin damage? Tanning is the skin's protective response from getting further damage. However, permanent damage has already been done by the time the tan develops. Skin can repair some of the superficial changes, which is why a sunburn lasts only a few days, and a tan fades. But the



Monroe Miller, Retired Superintendent and Executive Director of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association spoke at the recent spring business meeting. While he had the podium he described the treatments he had been undergoing to treat skin cancer on his face. The treatment had caused short term red splotches on his face.

Monroe warned the rest of us of the dangers of sun exposure over time.

underlying damage remains. The injury accumulates over the years with each successive exposure to the sun. One of the booklets poked fun at the term "healthy tan" as being a contradiction in terms.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans are diagnosed each year with skin cancer. The good news is that it is one of the most curable and also preventable forms of cancer. Two kinds of skin cancer are most common: basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma. Those cancers usually occur on skin that is exposed to the sun, and, if caught early, they are easily treated.



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NOTES FROM THE NOER

A third kind of skin cancer, malignant melanoma, is much less common but far more deadly. It is fast-spreading and can kill within months of its first appearance. Melanoma can be cured if it is diagnosed and treated when the tumor is thin and has not deeply invaded the skin. However, if melanoma is not removed at its early stages, cancer cells may grow downward, invading healthy tissue. When a melanoma becomes thick and deep, the disease often spreads to other parts of the body and is difficult to control. Even though melanoma is a very dangerous form of cancer, a 5-minute monthly self-exam can reveal cancerous changes enough to increase recovery chances considerably.

The self-exam described in the booklets said to look for a change in the size, shape, color or feel of an existing mole. Moles are clusters of the pigment forming cells of the skin with surrounding tissue that cause benign (noncancerous) growths. They are round or oval and smaller than a pencil eraser.

Most people have between 10 – 40 of

these flesh-colored, pink, tan, or brown areas on their skin. Moles can be flat or raised. They can be present at birth or occur later on --- but usually before age 40. Moles generally grow or change only slightly over a long period of time. The booklets said that moles generally fade away in older people.

The things to look for during your monthly 5-minute self-exam are moles that change, newly appear, or become ugly. Look for changes in the borders, variations in color, and/ or variations in texture. Don't overlook your scalp either. It is important to see a doctor if you find changes or if you are at all suspicious.

And be more careful out there. Although anyone can develop skin cancer, you are more at risk if you have light skin and/or freckles, have light hair or eye color, or have a tendency to burn easily. You should be more careful if you have a family history of skin cancer also, even though greater than 90% of the cause is from the sun. So people who spend long hours in the sun or periods during the

intense sunny part of the day are most at risk. That includes most of us reading this newsletter.

Skin cancer is greatly preventable even for people who work in the sun. Most dermatologists recommend that you use a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 30. Additionally they recommend you wear protective clothing and hats, protect eyes with sunglasses, wear lip balm with sunscreen, and remember there are dangers of UV radiation on cloudy days or even in the winter.

We, in the green industry, have to be more careful than the average person because of where we work for a living and the cumulative amount of sun exposure we encounter over a lifetime. Much more information is available on skin cancer prevention, diagnosis, and treatment by visiting the National Cancer Society website <http://www.cancer.org/Cancer/SkinCancer-Melanoma/index>.



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