The Burning Issues of Skin Cancer

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Putting your skin on the spot by regularly checking for changes in the appearance of moles, or suspicious ‘new arrivals’, can literally save your life.

When actress Melanie Griffith was photographed with a black eye in December 2009, she was forced to reveal she had undergone surgery to remove early-stage skin cancer. She’s not alone either.

Other Famous Faces That Fought Various Forms of Skin Cancer:

- Anderson Cooper
- Michelle Monaghan
- Diane Keaton
- Hugh Jackman
- James Rebhorn

Despite startling figures released by The World Health Organization (WHO) confirming skin cancer is on the rise, possible warning signs of the disease are still often ignored – sometimes for months, even years – before symptoms are taken seriously. WHO reports between two and three million non-melanoma skin cancers and about 132 000 malignant melanomas, the deadliest form of skin cancer, occur globally every year. Disturbingly in South Africa there are about 20 000 reported new cases every year and 700 deaths.

There Are Three Major Types of Skin Cancer

- Basal cell carcinoma (BCC)
- Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)
- Melanoma

The first two skin cancers are grouped together as non-melanoma skin cancers. Although they are still dangerous they are slow to develop in the upper layers of the skin, usually don’t spread to other areas and more than not respond well to treatment.

- BCC often presents as raised, translucent, pearly nodules that may crust, ulcerate and sometimes bleed and occurs commonly on the face, but can occur elsewhere.
- SCC usually appears as raised, pink opaque nodules or patches that frequently form ulcers or sores in the centre and usually forms on the hands, head, neck, lips and ears.
- Melanoma, however, is in a danger league of its own. A highly aggressive cancer, melanoma is responsible for about 75% of all skin cancer related deaths. It often appears as small, brown or black, or larger multi-coloured patches with an irregular outline which may crust and bleed. Malignant melanoma may occur in pre-existing moles or skin spots. It can also appear like freckles from previously normal skin. Malignant melanoma often tends to spread to other parts of the body.

“When it comes to detecting skin cancer it’s important to know what’s ‘normal’ for your individual skin. Like many cancers, skin cancers start as pre-cancerous lesions. The most
common sign of skin cancer is a change in the appearance of a lesion or the appearance of a new lesion, like a new mole or a change in the appearance of an old mole,” explains Dr Alex du Plessis, General Practitioner in Intercare Amanzimtoti, who specialises in Skin Cancer Management.

Dr Du Plessis says the majority of skin cancer cases are caused by exposure to UV light from the sun. Episodes of severe sunburn, usually before the age of 18, are thought to be a cause of the melanoma type skin cancers.

Sunbeds are also dangerous, and infrequently skin cancers can also form in burn wounds or scars and where a person is exposed to certain chemicals in their work situation. “A new study suggests that up to a quarter of one’s skin can change into cancer cells with age,” adds Dr Du Plessis.

Regular skin self examination is one of the best ways to catch skin cancers before they become deadly. Check yourself from head to toe - don't leave out any area of skin and pay special attention to birthmarks, moles and blemishes. Checking your skin regularly means you’ll become familiar with what’s ‘normal’ for you. If you find anything unusual see your doctor right away.