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SKIN CANCER ALERT
JUST BECAUSE YOU DON'T BURN, YOU STILL MAY BE AT RISK

DALLAS--Fair-skinned people usually don't have to be told to be careful of the sun's damaging rays. The sunburn they get provides a painful reminder of the kind of damage the sun can do.

But these people aren't the only ones who need to protect themselves from the sun, according to a dermatologist at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. Dr. Amit Pandya, assistant professor of dermatology, says there are circumstances in which darker-skinned people are susceptible to sun damage.

"A Hispanic or brown-skinned person who doesn't use sunscreen could be at risk of developing skin cancer, just like light-skinned patients," Pandya said. "Since they don't burn as easily, they are likely to spend more time in the sun. People who are aware of their sun sensitivity are more likely to protect themselves."

Pandya has seen Hispanic patients who have never had a bad sunburn, but who developed skin cancer after years of frequent sun exposure.

Darker-skinned people do have a lower incidence of skin cancer overall, and the darker the skin, the less the risk of skin cancer or other sun damage to the skin.

Sun risk is classified according to five types: Type I skin always burns and never tans; Type II skin burns easily and tans minimally; Type III skin burns moderately and tans gradually to a

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light brown; Type IV skin burns rarely and tans well to a dark brown; and Type V skin never burns.

The pigment particles in skin, called melanosomes, provide protection from the sun. The larger and more numerous the melanosomes, and thus the darker the skin, the more sun protection. "Deeply pigmented black people have a lower amount of sun damage. Everyone else has a higher risk of skin cancer and photo damage," Pandya said.

Cancer isn't the only problem that results from long-term sun exposure. The sun also can cause the appearance of premature aging. This process, called photoaging, results from overexposure to ultraviolet radiation. It causes wrinkled, dry, discolored skin, especially on the neck and around the eyes. Again, the culprit is a lifetime of prolonged exposure rather than a few bad sunburns.

"You can have years of exposure without a burn and still get photoaging," Pandya said.

The bottom line is that no matter what the skin tone, everyone needs to be careful about sun exposure. Use a good sunscreen consistently, even on cloudy days or during the winter. Wear a hat and loose, long-sleeved clothing. And avoid prolonged sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., the hours when the sun's rays are most direct, Pandya says.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.