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Melanoma: Heeding Warnings and Early Detection Can Save Lives

—Majority of Cases in Seniors; Prevention Should Begin in Childhood—

—May is National Melanoma Awareness Month—

Morristown, N.J. (May 1, 2008) – As summer approaches, many of us eagerly anticipate days at the beach and outdoor barbecues under the blazing sun. A bit of caution and common sense is needed however, to enjoy the warm weather and minimize the risk of developing melanoma. Melanoma is a serious and potentially deadly skin cancer with increased risk brought about by exposure to the sun’s ultraviolet (UV) rays or tanning devices. Dr. Aaron Chevinsky, a surgical oncologist at Allied Surgical Group in Morristown wants the public to understand that prevention from a young age and early detection saves lives when it comes to melanoma.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) estimates nearly 62,480 new melanomas will be diagnosed and approximately 8,420 deaths are expected in the United States during 2008. ACS also notes that melanoma is over 10 times more common in white Americans than in African Americans and it is slightly more common in males than in females. In men, it is most commonly found on the trunk, head and neck, and for women, it is most common on the lower legs.

Who is at Risk

The risk of developing melanoma increases with age, however it can also affect those under the age of 30. Childhood sunburns are a significant contributing factor, as well as frequent exposure to the sun or tanning beds on consistently exposed areas of the body. “Those who experience multiple sunburns during childhood or adolescence have a 30 to 40 percent higher risk of developing melanoma 20 years later, than those who did not experience sunburns as children,” says Chevinsky.

Family history, a fair complexion, light eyes, and freckles indicate that someone is more prone to developing the disease. Individuals with compromised immune systems and those who have had melanoma in the past are also at risk.

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In April 2008, the University of North Carolina released a study that revealed melanoma presents the highest risk of death when it appears on the scalp or neck. It is important to know that the chance of recovery is good if it is detected early.

What to Look For

Moles that are asymmetrical, more than one color, jagged edged, and increasing in size should raise suspicion. A doctor should be called anytime someone is concerned about the appearance of a mole, or if they notice a change in their skin.

“Exposed areas should not be the only areas of concern,” says Dr. Chevinsky. “Patients have been diagnosed with melanomas on the palms of their hands, the soles of their feet, and underneath fingernails.”

Melanoma in the News

Recent melanoma patient news included Bruce Springsteen’s former E Street Band member Danny Federici who died in mid April from the disease. Presidential hopeful Senator John McCain of Arizona was diagnosed with melanoma in 1993, and again in 2000. It has been previously reported that his melanoma is cured, however, campaign officials have yet to make McCain’s latest medical records available on the subject despite repeated requests by the press. The concern is that prior incidence of melanoma increases the risk of new melanomas occurring.

During his decades of medical practice, Dr. Chevinsky has successfully treated melanoma patients ranging in age from teenagers to those in their 90’s with melanoma located from the scalp to the toes and all areas in between.

A Patient’s Experience

John (“Jack”) Anderson of Morristown, now 78 years old and currently cancer free, is a patient who came to Dr. Chevinsky in time for surgery to be effective.

“My internist noticed a suspicious looking mole on my back and sent me to a dermatologist,” said Anderson. “When the dermatologist biopsy revealed that I had melanoma, I went to see Dr. Chevinsky who performed surgery to remove it.”

In his youth, Anderson was a light-eyed, fair skinned redhead who spent plenty of time outside. “Growing up, we often spent summers playing in shorts and sandals, without shirts. I was also in the army for 22 years and spent a lot of time in the sun. I enjoy being outdoors, and in my younger days, developing a tan was important to me,” he said.

Dr. Chevinsky performed surgery on Jack Anderson in March 2006 to remove the cancerous tissue and also biopsy some of his lymph nodes to be sure that it hadn’t spread. The surgery was successful and today, he sees Dr. Chevinsky every four to six months for a visual skin check and during some visits, a blood test. For his next exam this month, Dr. Chevinsky has recommended an x-ray for Anderson, as a precautionary measure, and always recommends self examination in between visits.

Dr. Chevinsky recommends parents and children of all ages minimize exposure to summer sun's UV rays by following these tips:

- Wear lightweight clothing that covers the arms and legs
- Apply sunscreen as directed on the package
- Seek shelter and shade between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Wear sunglasses with (UV) protection when outside

Tips for Skin Self Exams

The first step in monitoring your own skin is to learn where your birthmarks, moles, and blemishes are and what they usually look and feel like. Then, with the help of a full length mirror and a hand-held mirror, check yourself from head to toe.

1. Look at your face, neck, ears, and scalp. You may want to use a comb or a blow dryer to move your hair. You also may want to have a relative or friend check through your hair because this is difficult to do yourself.
2. Look at the front and back of your body in the mirror, then raise your arms and look at your left and right sides.
3. Bend your elbows and look carefully at your fingernails, palms, forearms (including the undersides), and upper arms.
4. Examine the back, front, and sides of your legs. Also look between your buttocks and around your genital area.
5. Sit and closely examine your feet, including the toenails, the soles, and the spaces between the toes.

(source: <http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/melanoma/page32>)

“By checking your skin regularly, you will become familiar with what is normal for you,” says Dr. Chevinsky. “If you find anything unusual, see your doctor right away.”

Aaron Chevinsky, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Dr. Aaron Chevinsky is a board certified general surgeon and surgical oncologist at Allied Surgical Group in Morristown, NJ. He is also an Associate Clinical Professor of Surgery in the division of Surgical Oncology of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and Chief of Surgical Oncology at the Carol G. Simon Cancer Center at Morristown Memorial Hospital.

At Allied Surgical Group, Dr. Chevinsky uses open surgery and laparoscopy, and offers many innovative technologies. He sees patients with breast diseases, GI tract diseases including colorectal cancer, pancreatic cancer, stomach cancer and liver tumors. Dr. Chevinsky has authored numerous papers in peer-reviewed journals and has been involved in multiple clinical studies as both chief investigator and associate investigator. He has been named in the guide to America's Top Surgeons, New Jersey Monthly's Top Docs™, and the Best Doctors in America™.

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About Allied Surgical Group

Allied Surgical Group is comprised of seven board certified surgeons, experienced in a wide range of surgical procedures. Areas of expertise include oncology, vascular, advanced laparoscopic, obesity surgery and minimally invasive surgery. Together they care for patients throughout the tri-state region with compassion and integrity. Allied Surgical Group is located at 261 James Street, Suite 2G, Morristown, NJ. For more information, call (973) 267-6400 or visit www.alliedsurgical.org

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Editor's note: Images available upon request.