Sun Safety

Five skin cancer myths Latinos can overcome to stay safe in the summer.

July 2, 2013 By Casey Halter

Summer is here and most of us can't wait to soak up the sun with friends and family. But while relaxing in the rays, don't forget one thing: Slather on the sunscreen. No one is immune to dangerous ultraviolet (UV) rays.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, outnumbering the incidence rates of breast, prostate, lung and colon cancers combined. More than 2 million people, or 1 in 5 Americans, are diagnosed every year and rates have risen by almost 600 percent since 1970.

Although Latinos are less likely to get skin cancer than whites, misperceptions about the way brown skin reacts with the sun could actually be putting Latinos at a greater risk for cancer-related death.

Here are five common myths among Latinos about skin cancer and the facts:

Myth: Dark skin means you're immune to skin cancer.

Fact: No one is fully protected from skin cancer, no matter how tan they are.

Cells in our epidermis called melanocytes produce lots of melanin, a pigment that gives skin, hair and eyes their color. It also naturally filters out UV rays. The more melanin we produce, the darker our skin, and hence, the better protected we are against the sun. But, according to studies, even the darkest skin shades only provide, on average, a natural sun protection factor (SPF) of 13.4.

It's important to know our natural SPF because UV rays cannot only harm our skin, but also damage our DNA within it. What's more, UV damage contributes to more than 90 percent of the visible changes associated with aging, no matter what your skin color.

However, many Latinos still think they're immune to UV damage. A 2013 study on sun safety by the Cancer Institute of New Jersey (CINJ) reported that just over 43 percent of Latinos said they rarely or never used sunscreen.

The incidence rate of melanoma, one of the most common types of skin cancer in the United

States among Latinos, has been steadily increasing. Melanoma has risen among Latinos nearly 20 percent over the last decade and now accounts for nearly 30 percent of new melanoma cases nationwide.

Myth: Getting a "base tan" will help shield you from the sun.

Fact: This myth is perpetuated by sun-bed companies, who market artificial tanning to teens as a way to protect their skin from future burns.

It's working. According to studies, nearly 7.6 percent of Latino high school students engage in indoor tanning today.
Studies show that just one session in the tanning bed can increase your chances of getting melanoma by 20 percent. The risk of getting basal-cell carcinoma also increases by 10 percent each visit. Squamous cell carcinoma risk is raised by 15 percent.

Overall, getting a "base tan" at an indoor bed more than triples your overall risk for skin cancer. Because of this, indoor tanning is classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a group 1 carcinogen, on a list of the most cancerous substances to humans.

To put that in context, artificial UV rays earn their place on the list next to plutonium, asbestos, mustard gas, arsenic and the hepatitis virus.

Myth: Any sunscreen will do, as long as you have something on.

Fact: Not all sun blocks are created equal.

The first thing you should remember when picking out sun protection is to look for the words "broad spectrum." That means the sunscreen you're choosing protects against both UVA (related to skin cancer and aging) and UVB rays (related to sunburns). It's also important to note that if your sunblock is below SPF 15 (like your skin), it's not doing anything.

Watch out for false claims in the store, too. Anything above SPF 55 is probably overstating its protection factor. Added ingredients like vitamin A, retinol and fragrances in sun block can compromise its overall effectiveness.

Re-apply a shot-glass size amount of sun block every two hours or after swimming and sweating, even if your lotion advertises waterproof or sweat-proof capabilities. Seek partial shade between 10am and 2pm, when the sun is at it's highest and those dangerous UV rays are at their most potent.

And don't forget about places where sunscreen doesn't reach, like your eyes and scalp. A wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses will help you look cool this summer and keep you safe from skin cancer.

Myth: The sun's UV rays are the only thing that can cause skin cancer.

Fact: Not all skin cancers are primarily caused by sun damage.

The second most common form of skin cancer among Latinos is squamous cell carcinoma, and it's not primarily caused by the sun. Instead, cancerous masses usually form over scars or chronically inflamed parts of the body. Squamous cell carcinoma is also usually found on the legs.

You can also be put at an increased risk for skin cancer if your immune system is weakened. HIV, lupus and radiation therapy are all linked to increased incidences of malignant skin cells. Also, some medications can make your skin more sensitive to UV rays. Check your prescription bottles before going out in the sun.

Myth: Detecting skin cancer is best left to the doctor.

Fact: Checking your skin often for irregularities at home is one of the best things you can do to stay proactive about your skin's safety.

People of color are, on average, diagnosed with skin cancer at much later stages than their high-risk white counterparts. At that point, skin cancers are more likely to be advanced and fatal.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Latinos are twice as likely to be diagnosed with late-stage melanoma, with 26 percent of all cases ending up this way, compared to 16 percent among whites.

Although melanoma has a 98 percent survival rate if found in its early stages, if allowed to develop and spread to the lymph nodes, this rate falls to 62 percent. And if skin cancer is left to metastasize to other organs, the chance of survival drops to only 15 percent. Late diagnoses, fueled by misperceptions about the disease and lower rates of linkage to the health care system are the main reasons why Latinos have much higher mortality rates.

Look out for red bumps with many broken blood vessels or a red rash that don't heal. These are the initial warning signs for basal cell carcinoma. Squamous cell carcinoma looks like a crusted red rash or an ulcer that doesn't heal. And melanoma initially looks like a dark pigmented mole or lesion with varied color or an irregular border.

By combining regular physician check-ups, informed in-home analyses, and employing proper protection against the sun's dangerous UV rays, Latinos can still have fun in the sun, while staying skin-safe against cancer.

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