Why are Skin Cancer Rates are on the Rise?

Cancer is a disease that has received a great deal of medical and media attention. We all know the causes and effects of cancer, and public education has resulted in a decline in the rates of most types of cancer. Despite these positive trends, however, skin cancer rates are on the rise.

More than one million Americans are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer every year. Most people are now aware that years of unprotected exposure to the sun will contribute to skin cancer. The closer a person gets to reaching fifty years of age, the more likely he or she is to develop skin cancer. However, it's not just people over 50 that are developing skin cancer. The disease is also on the rise for those under 40 years of age.

What's causing this increase in skin cancer rates? Experts suggest it's not only advanced age, coupled with unprotected exposure to the sun, that's causing this rapid increase in those under 40 years of age.

Ultraviolet Rays
Both natural sunlight and tanning devices emit ultraviolet light. Although we can't see or feel this light as it hits our skin, the UV exposure causes potentially irreversible damage to our DNA. Sometimes, the human body is able to repair this damage, although continued exposure to UV light will eventually outpace the rate in which the body is able to repair itself.

Tanning Beds
Young women tend to use tanning beds more than men, creating an increase in non-melanoma skin cancer rates in women. Unfortunately, many people are not aware that the light bulbs used by tanning salons emit a significant amount of UVA and UVB radiation, which are the main causes of skin cancer.

Sunbathing
Research indicates that people are spending more and more time sun tanning. Studies show that 80% to 90% of older adults diagnosed with a non-melanoma skin cancer present with the disease on the head and neck. Younger patients, however, are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer on the torso. This trend is likely due to the fact that younger patients are spending more time tanning outdoors. Again, the increased use of tanning beds is a contributing factor to the rise of non-melanoma skin cancer on the torso.

Intermittent Sun Exposure
Intense, short-lived bouts of sun exposure are definite contributors to the development of non-melanomas. Exposure of this type is typical to holidaymakers on tropical and Mediterranean beach vacations. These vacationers expose their skin to the hot sun without adequate protection, virtually unaware of the amount of damage that can occur with even one week's exposure. Those who are under the age of forty are at particular risk of suffering non-melanoma skin cancer from this type of intermittent sun exposure.

Tobacco
Research has indicated that smoking tobacco, whether through pipes or cigarettes, may increase the chance of developing skin cancer.

Ozone Layer
The atmosphere around the earth is shielded by the ozone layer. This protective layer shields the entire planet from the harmful UVB rays of the sun. Sadly, through the use of certain chemicals including aerosols, the world's human population has created a hole in the ozone layer. Chlorofluorocarbons, commonly known as CFCs, have assisted with the damage. As the hole in the ozone layer grows, more and more UVB light is reaching the earth each year. Exposure to this UVB light not only causes non-melanoma skin cancer, but also plays a key role in the development of melanoma cancer. Refrigerants and industrial chemicals are also contributing to the damage.

Public Knowledge
Some experts believe that skin cancer rates are on the rise simply because of increased public awareness. More people are aware of the signs and symptoms of skin cancer, and bringing their concerns to the attention of doctors.

Despite the vast amount of knowledge about the cancer causes, effects and prevention, skin cancer rates are on the rise. We need to listen to the information, and realize that none of us are immune to this terrible disease. Protect yourself today, with good sun block and other methods, and you will enjoy a healthier, cancer-free future.