

Iowa Farmer Today

Staying safe in the sun

By Mandy Archer

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A hat with a brim provides sun protection for ears, head and the back of the neck.

Photo courtesy Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, and there are 2.2 million new cases every year.

Iowa ranks among the top five states for melanoma cases, with rates higher than the national average. Additionally, agricultural workers have the highest rates of occupational skin disorders because of working long hours in direct sunlight during the sunniest times of the year.

The most concerning skin cancer is melanoma, which while fairly rare, is the most aggressive and can be deadly.

The risk of melanoma is higher if you have fair skin and/or hair and sunburn easily. This is because fair-complected individuals have lower melanin production and fewer protective barriers in their skin than dark-complected individuals. The buildup of melanin pigment helps block sunlight, and the risk of skin cancer is lower in populations with darker skin (although dark-skinned individuals can still get skin cancer).

Age is also a risk factor. People aged 65 or older are at an increased risk of developing melanoma compared with other populations due to compounding skin damage throughout their lifetime.

Though skin cancer is uncommon in youth, sun damage starts to occur in childhood. Not only is skin cancer caused by cumulative sun damage, but continued sun damage and sunburns can cause our skin to look older than it is. According to Dr. Mary Stone, a professor of dermatology at the University of Iowa, “Much of what we think about being aging of skin is actually sun damage of skin.”

Catching melanoma before it can metastasize (spread to other parts of the body) is crucial. If it spreads to stage 4 metastatic melanoma, without treatment there is a 5-year survival rate of 10%. Fortunately, newer chemotherapy agents are available and increasing survival.

Regardless of your age or skin tone, be on the lookout for new moles, lesions or other changing or growing skin abnormalities. Many moles are benign, and it is common to have around at least 30 moles by age 30, but only 25% of melanomas arise from a mole that you already have.

Use the “A-B-C-D-E” guide to examine for an atypical mole. A is for asymmetry which can be checked by looking at a mole, cutting it in half mentally and examining whether the two halves of the mole look different from one another. B is for the border of the mole. If the mole has a jagged border and is not a typical, round mole, check into it. Then, C is for color as you should be aware if the mole has a mixed color palette. Next, D stands for diameter, which is a problem if the mole is over 6 millimeters, and lastly, E is for an evolving and changing mole. Each of these letters exemplifies a mole abnormality and could signify a melanoma.

More importantly, prevention starts with limiting sun exposure. When possible, limit outdoor tasks during peak sunlight hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Covering up and keeping a shirt on while working is advantageous. Wear long sleeves and a wide-brimmed hat that is made for outdoor work, which will protect the back of the head and neck. Seeking shade throughout the day is also beneficial, and closed farm vehicles with overhead shading can also protect you from the sun while you work.

Other recommendations include wearing SPF 30 sunscreen or higher — SPF 50 is even better. Reapplying sunscreen every few hours is necessary. You can also purchase clothing with built in SPF.

Dr. Stone points out, “It’s not usually just a single event that leads to skin cancer, and you can’t go back and undo what you’ve done in the past. You can only be good going forward.”

Farmers are vulnerable to skin cancer due to the nature of their profession. No matter your age, you can start preventing further damage now and reduce your risk. If you have concerning skin lesions, you need to see your physician.

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