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Cover up, Idaho. Your skin cancer is showing.

Tanned skin is damaged skin. That's the message Idaho public health officials and the United States surgeon general are hoping that Idahoans and all Americans listen to and learn from. Skin cancer rates are increasing significantly across the nation and in Idaho.

Skin cancer is by far the most common cancer, even though it's also possible to prevent it with a few precautions. In Idaho, the incidence of the most deadly form of skin cancer, melanoma, has more than doubled over the past 30 years. The state is consistently among the top 10 states in the nation for its high melanoma rates. From 2007-2011, Idaho ranked eighth highest among all states for the rate of melanoma incidence and third highest for the rate of deaths caused by melanoma. Fifty-seven Idahoans died from melanoma in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available.

"The increase is not something to take lightly," said Patti Moran, Comprehensive Cancer Control program manager. "We know that Idahoans love the outdoors. We're not suggesting that people should stay inside on gorgeous, sunny days. We're suggesting that people enjoy their outdoor activities with the knowledge that too much sun is dangerous. Wear wide-brimmed hats, sunglasses, sunscreen and clothing that offers protection from the sun, and seek shade to reduce your risk for skin cancer and melanoma."

It takes just one or two blistering sunburns before age 18 to double a person's risk for skin cancer later in life. Other risk factors include:

- A personal or family history of melanoma and the presence of moles, especially if there are many or they are unusually large.
- Exposure to ultraviolet radiation, either naturally from the sun or from artificial sources such as tanning beds, appears to be the most significant factor in the development of skin cancer.
- Intermittent exposure rather than regular exposure to ultraviolet radiation (such as vacations at the beach) has been shown to be a greater risk for developing melanoma.

There is some good news: Skin cancer is largely preventable when sun-protection measures are consistently followed. The American Academy of Dermatology recommends that sunscreen with a sun-protective factor (SPF) of 30 or higher be used in combination with other sun protection behaviors, including:

- Avoiding the sun between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.
- Wearing sun-protective clothing when there is no shade
- Avoiding artificial sources of ultraviolet light, such as tanning beds and sunlamps

“We want people to enjoy the outdoors as part of a healthy lifestyle that includes protecting themselves from the damaging and potentially deadly effects of the sun,” Moran said.

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