

Dangerous rays

By **Julia Gerke, The Suburban**

At first, Stacylynn Morel thought it was just a pimple.

But the little spot on the right side of her nose would not go away.

"Over a year and a half, it would come and go. It was this weird patch of skin that would kind of flake, but not really, and it only got really bad in the last three months," says Morel, 29. "Then it started to bleed sometimes, so I knew I had to go and have it checked out."

Her dermatologist took a biopsy and a month later, came back with the prognosis: basal cell carcinoma, a non-lethal type of skin cancer.

"I had a feeling that it might be cancer, and I knew it wasn't life-threatening, but it was still scary," says Morel. "I think it was the word cancer that was so scary."

Morel is one of thousands of Canadians that will be diagnosed with skin cancer this year.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in Canada and accounts for about one third of all diagnosed cancers. The most serious form of skin cancer — melanoma — can be deadly, but it only makes up one or two percent of all skin cancers. Non-melanoma cancers, the type that Morel had, as well as squamous cell carcinoma, are much more common. They only affect the outer layer of the skin and in most cases, can be treated effectively.

According to Dr. Ari Demirjian, dermatologist and expert on skin cancer, the number of cases has risen dramatically.

"Just to put it in perspective, in 1984, there were 4,300 cases of skin cancers removed in the province of Quebec," he says. "In 2005, the number was 24,000."

Also, not too long ago, skin cancer was mostly associated with people over the age of 50, adds Demirjian. Not anymore.

"Now it affects people at the age of 30. That was unheard of a few years ago. The patients are getting younger and younger," he says.

Most people know by now that skin cancer is directly linked to the skin's exposure to ultraviolet radiation (UV), which is sent out by the sun and certain types of lamps. While in the past the earth's ozone layer used to filter out the sun's most harmful rays, that protective layer is much thinner than it used to be, and the very real threat of skin cancer is now casting a very long shadow over beautiful summer days.

The rise in the number of cases is unnecessary, since skin cancer is often preventable by wearing sunscreen, sunglasses and other protective clothing, as well as avoiding the sun during peak hours between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Skin cancers often start in the head and neck areas, which are most exposed to the sun, but they can appear anywhere on the body. Demirjian says the most critical time is around 18 years of age, when lots of sun exposure and many burns can set the stage for skin cancer. Some people have to be extra careful (see sidebar below). Morel, with her fair skin and freckles, was considered to be at a higher risk for skin cancer.

Despite public awareness campaigns and annual reminders of the harmful rays, society still regards a tan as 'healthy' and beautiful, and that might be one of the reasons skin cancer is so prevalent today, according to Demirjian.

"There are definitely behavioral issues that come into play here. People think that getting a burn is bad, but it's not only about the sunburns," says Demirjian. "It's not only about going to the beach and lying there for hours. Going outdoors means you're taking sun. It's cumulative, it adds up over time."

If Sandy Unger-Tobenstein could turn back time, she would do many things differently. She had her first skin cancer surgically removed when she was in her early 50s, and a second one a year later.

"When I was younger, I did a lot of sun tanning. I even used a sun reflector and baby oil," she says. "I would never do that today. When I heard the doctor say cancer, I turned green. I thought I had melanoma and I was going to die. Now I am very nervous when I get something on my face. I go to my check-ups every six months, just to be sure."

Both Morel and Unger-Tobenstein were diagnosed with basal cell carcinoma, but they opted for different treatments. Unger-Tobenstein had hers removed with Mohs procedure, a micrographic surgery, which uses a microscope to trace and remove the tumour. Although it has a high success rate, it may leave a scar, so Morel chose Aldara, an immune system activator cream that could take up to three months before showing results.

"It gets really gross," she says. "The area is now really red, inflamed and swollen, and it looks much worse than before the treatment. But that means it's working."

For both, the process has instilled a lot of respect for the destructive power of the sun.

"When I go outside now, I always wear a hat and SPF 30. I am going to bring an umbrella to the beach. There really is no reason to sit in the sun," says Morel.



Morel: There's no reason to sit in the sun.

Unger-Tobenstein says others need to change their behaviour.

"People are stupid. They hear about it from everywhere, but they still do it. It bothers me," she says. "I took a picture of how I looked when I came home after the surgery and put it in my purse. Whenever I go to the beach and I take the sunscreen from my purse, I see the picture. That is the best reminder."

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