

Activity 9: Skin cancer rates

Aims

- To learn about current trends in skin cancer in the population.
- To develop students' analytical skills.

Assessment outcomes English 4.3, H&PE 4.6

Reference fact sheet Fact sheet 1: Skin cancer

Worksheet Worksheet 9: Doubling in skin cancer sparks warning

Teacher guidelines

- 1 Distribute Worksheet 9: Doubling in skin cancer sparks warning.
- 2 Discuss with students the meaning of any words not understood.
- 3 Ask students to read and discuss the article and then answer the questions.

Worksheet 9: Doubling in skin cancer sparks warning

Read the following article and then answer the questions below:

Doubling in skin cancer sparks warning

SYDNEY: Figures showing a doubling in skin-cancer rates have sparked renewed warnings about the dangers of sun exposure.

But while the most common forms of skin cancer increased steeply among the over-50s they were stable or declining slightly in younger people – an indication that the slip, slop, slap message may finally be paying off.

Figures issued by the Cancer Council of Australia yesterday show the number of people being treated for non-melanoma skin cancer has increased by more than a third since 1995 and doubled in the last two decades.

About 374,000 Australians over the age of 14 were treated for at least one non-melanoma skin cancer in 2002, compared with 270,000 in 1995 and 168,000 when the first national survey

was conducted in 1985.

The number of people treated for non-melanoma skin cancer last year was more than four times the number of people with all other cancers combined, NSW Cancer Council chief Andrew Penman said.

“People have got to be conscious of the fact that we are living in an increasingly irradiated environment,” he said. “It means that Australians have to be ever vigilant about the need for sun protection.”

The chair of the Cancer Council’s skin-cancer committee, Craig Sinclair, said the increase in skin cancer in the over-50 age group was the result of post-war change in clothing and sun exposure habits and the absence of sun protection campaigns.

In particular, social changes like

the growth of beach culture and the advent of the bikini exposed post-war Australians to increased risks.

“We’re seeing the increase where we’d expect to see it,” he said.

“Only people whose childhood was spent after the sun protection campaigns began can expect to benefit from the ... increased awareness about sun protection.”

Mr Sinclair said while damage caused by the sun during childhood – the most critical time – could not be reversed by covering up in later life, it could be reduced.

Similarly, good protection during childhood did not provide a licence to slacken off during adulthood.

Canberra Times, 20 November, 2003

- 1 What do the skin cancer statistics indicate for the over 50’s age group?

- 2 What do the skin cancer statistics indicate for younger people? Explain why.

- 3 a) How many Australians over the age of 14 were treated for at least one non-melanoma skin cancer in 2002?

- b) How does this compare with numbers in 1995 and 1985?

- c) What is this saying about the incidence of non-melanoma skin cancer over 20 years?

- 4 What does NSW Cancer Council chief say about sun protection?

Worksheet 9: Doubling in skin cancer sparks warning (cont.)

- 5 a) What does the chair of The Cancer Council's skin cancer committee say is the cause of the increase in skin cancer in the over 50 age group?

- b) When does he say is the critical time for sun damage?

- 6 What is the overall message of this article about sun protection?



Fact sheet 1: Skin cancer

Structure and function of the skin

The skin is the largest organ of the body. It has several important functions. It acts as a protective layer against injury and disease and also regulates our body temperature and maintains its hydration.

The skin consists of three layers:

- the epidermis, or the outer layer
- the dermis, or the inner layer
- the subcutaneous fat layer.

The epidermis is made up of cells that produce keratin, a substance that covers the outside of the skin and resists heat, cold and the effects of many chemicals. The cells in the epidermis also produce melanin, the substance that gives our skin its colour. Melanin is able to absorb ultraviolet light and provide some protection from its damaging effects.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the body's cells. Normally the body's cells grow and divide in an orderly manner so that growth and healing of injured tissue occurs.

Occasionally some cells behave in an abnormal way and may grow into a lump which is called a tumour.

Tumours can be non-cancerous [benign] or cancerous [malignant]. Benign tumours do not spread to other parts of the body.

A malignant tumour is made up of cancer cells. These cells have the ability to spread beyond the original site and if left untreated may invade and destroy surrounding tissues. Sometimes cells break away from the original [primary] cancer and spread to other organs. When these cells reach a new site they may form another tumour often referred to as a secondary cancer or metastasis.

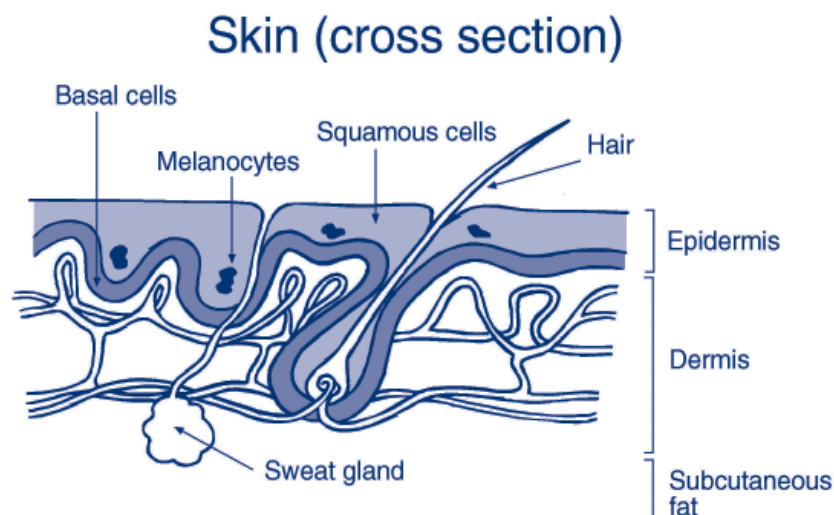
What is skin cancer?

Skin cancer is a type of cancer that begins in the basal layer of the epidermis. There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. Melanomas start in the pigment cells [melanocytes] while basal and squamous cell carcinomas develop from the epidermal cells. [Carcinoma is a term used for some types of cancer].

Basal cell carcinoma [BCC]

Basal cell carcinomas are the most common but least dangerous type of skin cancer. They grow slowly over months to years but if left untreated a deep [rodent] ulcer may form. Fortunately they very rarely spread to other parts of the body. If you have one basal cell carcinoma you may have others, either at the same time or in later years.

Basal cell carcinomas are most commonly found on the face, neck and upper trunk. They appear as a lump or scaly area and are pale, pearly or red in colour. They may have blood vessels on the surface.



Fact sheet 1: Skin cancer (cont.)

Squamous cell carcinoma [SCC]

Squamous cell carcinomas are less common but more dangerous than basal cell carcinomas. They usually grow over a period of weeks to months. These cancers may spread to other parts of the body [metastasise] if not treated promptly.

Squamous cell carcinomas appear on areas of the skin most often exposed to the sun. They have scaling, red areas which may bleed easily and ulcerate, looking like an unhealed sore.

These common skin cancers generally occur in people over the age of 40. However basal cell carcinoma can occur in younger adults. The major cause of these skin cancers is sun exposure over many years.

Melanoma

Melanoma is the rarest but most dangerous skin cancer. If left untreated melanoma can spread to distant parts of the body to form secondary cancers or metastases.

Melanomas can appear anywhere on the body not only in areas that get a lot of sun. The first sign of a melanoma is usually a change in a freckle or mole, or the appearance of a new spot on normal skin. Changes are normally seen over a period of several weeks to months, not over several days. The changes are in size, shape or colour.

Melanoma can occur from adolescence onwards and is the most common cancer in the 15–44 year age group. In rare instances it may develop in children.

How common is skin cancer?

Skin cancer rates are higher in Australia than anywhere else in the world. It is the most common form of cancer in Australia affecting all age groups from adolescents upwards. Most common is basal cell carcinoma which accounts for about 75% of all skin cancers. Squamous cell carcinoma accounts for 20% and melanoma less than 5%.

One out of two Australians will develop a skin cancer in their lifetime – usually a basal cell carcinoma. In South Australia in 2003 the lifetime risk for developing melanoma was 1 in 31 for men and 1 in 39 for women.

Signs and symptoms

As skin cancers are visible, they can be seen and checked as soon as they develop. Early symptoms of skin cancer may seem quite minor but any suspicious spot should be seen by a doctor immediately.

The signs to look for are:

- A crusty, non-healing sore.
- A small lump which is red, pale or pearly in colour.
- A new spot, freckle or mole changing in colour, thickness or shape over a period of several weeks to months. Particular attention should be paid to spots that are dark brown to black, red or blue-black.

Diagnosis

If a doctor suspects a skin cancer, a biopsy may be performed. A biopsy is the removal of all or part of the affected skin, generally under local anaesthetic. It is a simple procedure that can be done by your family doctor or you can be referred to a specialist. The piece of skin that has been removed is then examined under a microscope. However in many cases the whole tumour is removed and a specimen is then sent to the laboratory for diagnosis.

Treatment

Common skin cancers



A variety of methods are available to treat the common skin cancers. Your doctor will choose your treatment by taking into consideration a number of factors. These will include the type of skin cancer, its size and position on your body and your personal preference.

Surgery can be used to remove the skin cancer and a small area of normal skin. This is quite simple and can usually be done under local anaesthetic.

Sunspots or pre-cancers can be briefly frozen with liquid nitrogen. This is called cryotherapy. Following cryotherapy the skin can become intensely red and peel away. Healing will begin in about a week.

Another technique is simply scraping off small common cancers [curettage] and burning the spot [cautery or diathermy].

Fact sheet 1: Skin cancer (cont.)

Radiation therapy is another option although less commonly used now. It causes a crusting sore which takes some weeks to heal and then leaves a scar.

Melanoma

Surgery is the preferred method of treatment for melanoma. Very thin melanomas are usually removed along with a small area of normal skin, under local anaesthetic.

For deeper melanomas a wide area of skin may need to be removed to make sure that all the cancer cells have been taken out. The local lymph glands may also be removed at this time.

Outlook

Virtually all basal and squamous cell carcinomas that are found and treated early are cured.

The majority of people with early melanoma which is appropriately treated do not have any further trouble with their disease. However because there is a chance that the melanoma will reappear, your doctor will examine you at regular intervals.

For further details on outlook you should speak to your own doctor who is familiar with your full medical history.

Causes of skin cancer

The major cause of skin cancer is exposure to the ultraviolet rays of the sun over many years.

Sunlight exposure

Childhood exposure to the sun is an important factor in the development of skin cancer later in life. Research also suggests there may be a link between sunburn during childhood and melanoma in adulthood.

Occupation

People who work outdoors have a greater risk of developing the common skin cancers than indoor workers. This is because of their greater exposure to sunlight. Workers in some industries have to take precautions against other known causes of common skin cancers, such as arsenic, polycyclic hydrocarbons and a number of other chemical compounds.

Who is at risk?

Everyone is at risk of skin cancer, although people with skin that burns easily and rarely tans are at the greatest risk. Those who burn in early summer and then tan are also at high risk if they do not protect their skin. Unprotected skin, whether tanned or not, is likely to be damaged by the sun and may develop skin cancer later in life.

Skin type

Skin cancer is seen most often in fair skinned people who have lived in Australia all their lives. It is most common in people of Celtic [Scottish, Irish and Welsh] background. However it also occurs in people whose parents migrated from Southern Europe e.g. Greece or Italy and who have themselves spent all or most of their lives in Australia. This is because the Australian sunlight is very harsh.

Existing skin damage

Solar keratoses [sunspots] are dry, rough spots on the skin that are common in people over 40. They are not skin cancers but an indication that the skin has had enough sun exposure to develop skin cancer. People with keratoses should take particular care to protect their skin from the sun. Keratoses may progress and develop into SCCs.

They should also be examined to make sure a skin cancer is not present.

How can you reduce your risk?

- Minimise your time in the sun between 10.00 am – 3.00 pm.
- Use shade as much as possible when outdoors.
- Wear protective clothing - a wide brimmed hat and cover-up clothing.
- Apply SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen to skin which isn't covered by clothing.

