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HEALTH BYTES

The cancer myth that puts darker skin at risk

The belief that people with darker skin can't get skin cancer is simply false. In reality, anyone can be affected.

When people assume their skin tone protects them from the sun, they may overlook warning signs. As a result, skin cancer is often only caught at a more advanced stage, making treatment more difficult. Yet, skin cancer is highly treatable if caught early.

Why darker skin is still at risk

Melanin is the pigment in your body that gives colour to your skin, hair and eyes. It absorbs some of the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays and stops it damaging your DNA.

So the more melanin you have, the longer you can be exposed to the sun without burning, but it doesn't completely protect you from skin cancer.

In fact, in darker skin, some cancers appear in areas with little sun exposure - like the soles of the feet.

Types of skin cancer

- **Basal cell carcinoma**
Appears as a shiny bump (black, brown or blue on dark skin), a scaly patch, or a scar-like area. Often mistaken for pimples, moles or eczema.
- **Squamous cell carcinoma**
The most common in Black and Indian people. Shows as a rough patch, crust, or sore that bleeds. Often mistaken for eczema, psoriasis or warts.
- **Melanoma**
The most dangerous. Appears as a mole or bump with uneven shape, edges or colour. In darker skin it often shows on palms, soles, fingers, toes and nail beds.

Protect yourself

- **Sunscreen:** Use SPF20 or higher daily. Reapply every two hours, more if swimming or sweating.
- **Cover:** Stay in shade between 10am and 4pm. Wear hats, long sleeves and UV400 sunglasses.
- **Check:** Do a monthly self-check, including feet and hands.
- **Schedule:** Get a yearly skin check. If you notice changes, see a doctor immediately.

Warning signs

Any suspicious spot should be checked by a medical professional. Remember the ABCDE rule:

- **Asymmetry** - uneven shape
- **Border** - irregular or raised edges
- **Colour** - changes or uneven tones
- **Diameter** - growing larger
- **Evolving** - changes in size, shape, colour or symptoms (like itching or bleeding)



Tip: To cover your body properly, use enough sunscreen to fill a shot glass, plus one teaspoon for your face and neck. Don't forget your ears.

Reference: CANSA Skin Cancer Fact Sheet

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