Doctors disagree on benefits of sun exposure, but not on risks

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ORLANDO, Fla. — There are three common types of skin cancer \u2014 and Jim Jones has had them all.

Doctors removed his first basal-cell cancer from behind an ear about 30 years ago. Since then, he has had the most dangerous skin malignancy, melanoma, taken off his chest.

More recently, he underwent major surgery to remove a deeply embedded squamous-cell cancer from his left cheek. Doctors have cut dozens of lesions from Jones through the years, making skin cancer a regular part of his life.

Today, the Sanford, Fla., man uses sunscreen, seeks shade, or wears hats and avoids being outside during the most intense hours of the day. Such precautions are the mainstay of doctors' advice on reducing the risk of skin cancer — the most common malignancy in the United States, with more than 1 million cases a year.

Yet Florida's crowded beaches are proof the advice is ignored. What's more, doctors now are fielding questions about reports that sun exposure might reduce the risk of some cancers by boosting the body's production of vitamin D.

No one is suggesting people fry themselves. The thinking is that about 15 minutes outside with no sunscreen, two or three times a week, is enough to increase vitamin D production in the body. In turn, vitamin D wards off the cell damage that could lead to cancer.

But many dermatologists and medical organizations, including the American Cancer Society, are cringing at the notions that turn traditional sun-safety logic on its head.

"The evidence that vitamin D prevents cancers is still quite limited," said Dr. Michael R. Thun, the society's chief epidemiologist. "But the evidence is very solid that sun exposure creates life-threatening melanomas and other nonthreatening skin cancers ...

"Unless you're living in a closet in Orlando, you're probably getting enough sun, and too many people are probably getting too much sun."

One proponent of the sun's potential cancer-fighting effects is Dr. Michael Holick, a Boston vitamin D researcher who wrote a book called "The UV Advantage." He is just as irked when the American Academy of Dermatology refers to views on spending unprotected time in the sun as "irresponsible."

"Like anything else, in excess, the sun is not going to be good for you, but in moderation, it's not going to hurt you," said Holick, who teaches at Boston University. "The problem is that the American Academy of Dermatology is a very conservative organization.

"They've been out there for years brainwashing the American public to not go out in direct sunlight without sunscreen, and for someone to challenge them is a big controversy."

One point on which everyone agrees is that skin-cancer rates have grown to epidemic levels in the United States. Fortunately, most cases fall into two typically curable categories called basal- and squamous-cell carcinomas.

Though rarely deadly, these cancers can be recurring and disfiguring as doctors continually remove the malignant tissues. More than 1 million cases are expected annually in the United States.

The danger escalates greatly, though, when the skin's pigment-containing cells, or melanocytes, become cancerous. If not found early, melanoma can spread aggressively in the body and lead to death.

About 60,000 Americans will be diagnosed with the illness this year, and Florida is second only to California in sheer numbers of the newly stricken. Nationwide, almost 8,000 people will die from melanomas in 2005.

Anyone can get melanoma, but the fairest people — those with light skin and hair, freckles, blue eyes — have a higher risk. It's also linked to sun exposure, and doctors say even one blistering sunburn as a child significantly increases a person's chance of developing the disease.

Jones, a fair-skinned redhead who spent much of his youth getting burned, fits that profile all too well. He must go to a dermatologist regularly to be examined for signs of melanoma or any other skin cancers.

"I don't think any dermatologist would ever tell me I'm cancer-free," said Jones, 58. "It's just that at the moment, I don't have anything that needs to be biopsied."

Not all melanomas are connected to ultraviolet rays. Some people are born with a certain type of mole that makes them more susceptible to the cancer.

Others get melanomas in regions that don't get much sunlight, which begs the question: Did the sun cause this?

"Melanomas do occur most commonly in sun-exposed areas, but they can show up anywhere — that's one of the perplexing things," said Dr. Gregory Pennock, an oncologist who treats melanoma at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando. "We assume they're associated with the sun anyway, but we don't really know."

Layne Hooper of Apopka, Fla., doesn't blame the rays for her melanoma, which occurred near her armpit. Denise Fusselman of Maitland, Fla., has no doubt the sun nurtured the melanoma on her left cheekbone.

Whatever the root cause, Central Florida dermatologists commonly see melanoma in their patients. Dr. Maxine Tabas, a Florida Hospital dermatologist, has found the disease in a patient as young as 12. She routinely sees the cancer in 20-somethings on up.

"I can diagnose two melanomas a week," she said, "it's that bad."

Tabas is not ready to embrace new thinking on sun exposure. She wears sunscreen, a hat, sunglasses and long-sleeved, long-pants protective clothing when she goes horseback riding.

"Yes, you need to produce vitamin D, but we (in Florida) get enough sun without seeking it on purpose," Tabas said. "Until I see proof that vitamin D is protective, I'm using my SPF 45 sunscreen."

While many doctors are waiting for more information, vitamin D proponents say the evidence that it cuts the risk of some cancers already is compelling.

Holick cited a study that found men with higher levels of vitamin D in their blood cut their risk of prostate cancer by 80 percent. Additional studies suggest the vitamin might ward off lymphoma, lung, breast and colon cancer.

Though some foods are rich in vitamin D, Holick said most people can't get enough of it through their diets alone. He said people need about 1,000 international units of the vitamin daily to get its cancer-prevention benefits. A glass of milk has about 100 international units — meaning people would need to drink 10 glasses of milk to reach that level.

On the other hand, a person can generate about 20,000 international units in 20 to 30 minutes in bright sunshine, which triggers vitamin D production in the skin. That's why vitamin D is nicknamed "the sunshine vitamin."

"Whether you like it or not, most of our vitamin D requirement is already coming from our sun exposure," Holick said. "We evolved and our skin pigment specifically evolved to make vitamin D."

Though people shouldn't consume more than 2,000 international units of the vitamin D in supplements, scientists say there is no danger of overdosing by loading up on the sun-induced variety.

Holick said he practices what he preaches by going outdoors with bare skin several times a week. If he's playing tennis, for instance, he will go through the first set before applying his sunscreen.

He has no doubt that vitamin D provides some cancer protection.

"We know from laboratory testing, for example, that animals which are vitamin D-deficient develop a much more aggressive type of colon cancer," Holick said. "The data are very strong and very compelling."

Doctors don't disagree that vitamin D might have anti-cancer benefits. But many say they cannot support using the sun to get more of it.

"It's a highly irresponsible message to give to people," said Dr. Clay J. Cockerell, a Dallas dermatologist and president of the American Academy of Dermatology. "Basically, just walking to and from your car, you're getting enough sun to get any additional vitamin D that you're not getting in your diet."

He said sunscreen doesn't provide complete protection, so people still get some UV exposure even when they're wearing it. Furthermore, he said, people can boost their vitamin D levels with a supplement if they want.

"There are a lot safer ways to get vitamin D," he said.

Skin-cancer patients don't need lessons in sun safety. They can give them.

Hooper, 37, still enjoys being outside, but sunscreen is a must, and she tries to stay indoors during the peak hours.

"If I go to the beach, it's in the late afternoon, and I have an umbrella," she said.

Fusselman takes even more precautions. When going outdoors to walk in the waning sunlight, she is coated in sunscreen and clothing.

"I look like a beekeeper," said Fusselman, 46. "I embarrass my sons with my big hat, but I don't care — I have no interest in being irradiated

anymore."

Jones is also a hard-core avoider of the sun's rays.

He is troubled by the thought of anyone suggesting unprotected sun exposure. As a teen, Jones said, a dermatologist told him that he could reduce an acne problem by maintaining a light sunburn on his face.

Jones doesn't fault the doctor, who was using the information available at the time. But he hopes no one overdoes the sun simply to get more vitamin D.

"People should learn from what happened to me," said Jones, who is retired from the U.S. Postal Service. "Maybe people in Maine or South Dakota have to worry about getting sun — I don't know. But it's foolish for anyone in Florida to go out and not protect themselves."

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