Debunking the Myth That People of Color Don’t Need Sunscreen

Darker skin doesn’t rule out your risk for skin cancer, aging or a host of other sun-related damage.

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Do people with darker skin really need to use sunscreen? Absolutely, say skin care experts at the University of California in a recent press piece debunking the myth that people of color aren’t at risk for skin cancer.

In fact, skin cancer can strike anyone. It’s caused by exposure to the sun’s ultraviolet rays, which raises the risk of all forms of skin cancer, including melanoma, one of the most dangerous forms of skin cancer.

Don’t believe it? Jamaican music icon Bob Marley was just 36 when he died of an aggressive form of melanoma (acral lentiginous melanoma) known for primarily affecting people of color. What’s more, African Americans have the lowest melanoma survival rates of any other racial group in the country—with five-year survival rates at just 66% compared with 90% for white people.

A lack of awareness is partly to blame, as are myths suggesting that natural melanin in the skin of people of color protects them from the sun. Experts say that although melanin does offer some protective properties, they do not nullify the risk for sun damage or skin cancer. The sun’s rays can also cause other cosmetic issues, including hyperpigmentation and melasma (grayish-brown spots) on dark skin.

The skin cancer myth can do real harm. Late diagnosis of skin cancer is a major concern. Aside from well-documented disparities in care among people of color in the United States, some skin conditions, including cancer, can present differently in people with darker skin tones. According to the American Academy of Dermatology, people of color should look for the following:

- Dark spot, growth, or darker patch of skin that is growing, bleeding or changing in any way
- Sore that won’t heal—or heals and returns
- Sore that has a hard time healing, especially if the sore appears in a scar or on skin that was injured in the past

- Patch of skin that feels rough and dry
- Dark line underneath or around a fingernail or toenail

Complicating matters even further is that few skin care doctors in the United States are people of color. Currently, just 3% of dermatologists are African American, while 4.2% are Latino.

To learn more about how people of color can reduce their risk for skin cancer, watch UC Davis Health's video on the topic.

The read the American Academy of Dermatology's advice for people of color, click here.

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