Stay Safe in the Sun

Chelsea Dawson, an eight-year melanoma survivor, lives with her family in Roanoke, Virginia.

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I grew up in the bright, beautiful sunshine on the Virgina shore. Shade was something we avoided, sunscreen was applied when we remembered and the idea of wearing a shirt over my bathing suit was enough to make me roll my eyes at my mother. I loved nothing more than feeling the sun on my shoulders. Protecting my skin was not high on my list of priorities.

Everything changed when I was diagnosed with Stage III malignant melanoma at age 23. Despite growing up on the beach and using tanning beds for years, I had never seen a dermatologist. In December 2010, a mole on my back turned into a scab and began to leak clear fluid. I didn't know much about melanoma, but I knew that a changing mole was a warning sign I shouldn't ignore.

By the time my appointment with the dermatologist rolled around, the mole had healed. The doctor did a full body exam, educated me about the need for sunscreen and yearly skin checks and removed the healed mole to be on the safe side. Because of his positive attitude, I left the office feeling assured that everything was fine.

Two weeks later, I was informed that the mole was melanoma. After an incredibly painful surgery, we learned that the cancer had spread to lymph nodes on both sides of my body. I enrolled in a clinical trial of an immunotherapy drug, Yervoy (ipilimumab), to prevent cancer recurrence. I was treated for the next three years and then continued surveillance until my oncologist discharged me in December 2017.

We often hear from medical professionals that we should get routine skin checks. I learned firsthand how important that is! Since my original diagnosis, I've had two additional melanoma lesions removed during routine dermatology screenings. My family members have also become loyal to their screenings. My mom had an early-stage melanoma, and my grandmother has had numerous skin cancer lesions removed. I can't help but wonder what would happen if we became too busy living our lives and canceled our yearly screenings—it's too scary to consider!

Now that I'm a melanoma survivor and a mom, I'm creating a life very different from the one I lived. We still love days on the beach, but we follow the rules of sun safety. Although he is only 2 years old, my toddler knows that we don't have fun in the sun without the protection of shade, sunscreen and UV-blocking clothing.

When I was first learning to navigate life post-melanoma, I recall feeling scared of the sun. After time and healing, I've learned not to fear the beautiful sunshine but to respect it. Society now embraces the need for sun protection with fashionable UV-protective clothes, beach umbrellas and many types of sunscreen. Thanks to research and education, protecting our skin is now a priority!

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