Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

An archive of past wellness articles is available at http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/9966.asp

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Watch for signs of skin cancer

Today, May 2, is Melanoma Monday.

Melanoma is a form of skin cancer in which abnormal skin cells grow out of control. It helps to learn about this condition and what can be done about it.

It is very important for you to take good care of your skin so you do not get melanoma.

Melanoma shows up mostly on skin that is not regularly covered up, but it can appear anywhere on the body. Melanoma is most often found early, when it can be cured. The most common treatment is surgery to remove melanoma. Sometimes lymph nodes near the cancer are also removed. You may also receive medicine that kills cancer cells (chemotherapy) or medicine that boosts your immune system (immunotherapy). Some people choose to have plastic surgery if they have a very noticeable scar after the surgery.

If you do receive a cancer diagnosis, you may feel many emotions and need some help coping. Seek out family, friends, and counsellors for support. You can also do things at home to make yourself feel better while you go through treatment. Call the Canadian Cancer Society (1-888-939-3333) or visit its website at www.cancer.ca for more information.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. After treatment, you will need regular checkups with your doctor to make sure melanoma has not come back. Your doctor also will watch to be sure that you do not develop another melanoma. Call your doctor if you are having problems. They are there to support you.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Learn the most important warning signs for melanoma—a change in the size, shape, or colour of a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- Check all the skin on your body once a month for skin growths or other changes, such as changes in colour and feel of the skin.
    - Stand in front of a full-length mirror. Look carefully at the front and back of your body. Then look at your right and left sides with your arms raised.
    - Bend your elbows and look carefully at your forearms, the back of your upper arms, and your palms.
    - Look at your feet, the bottoms of your feet, and the spaces between your toes.
    - Use a hand mirror to look at the back of your legs, the back of your neck, and your back, rear end (buttocks), and genital area. Part the hair on your head to look at your scalp.
- If you see a change in a skin growth, contact your doctor. Look for:
    - A mole that bleeds.
    - A fast-growing mole.
    - A scaly or crusted growth on the skin.
    - A sore that will not heal.

Protect your skin

- Always wear sunscreen on exposed skin. Make sure to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen that has a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher. Use it every day, even when it is cloudy. While you are outdoors, apply more sunscreen every two to three hours or any time your skin gets wet.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat, a long-sleeved shirt, and pants if you are going to be outdoors for very long.
- Stay out of the sun during the midday hours (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.), when UV rays are strongest.
- Avoid sunlamps and tanning salons.