

## Skin Cancer By the Numbers

Your skin is the single largest organ of your body. It covers every bit of the body, protecting all the internal organs, the bones, the nerves and muscles. It works hard to shield the body from germs. The skin minimizes injury and keeps the fluid levels regulated inside your body. Your skin normalizes your body temperature, and perspires to eliminate excess salts and fluids. It has a warning system called pain, to protect you from getting hurt. All you have to do in return it defend it from harm. That seems to be a reasonable trade.

The best way for you to accomplish this is to do everything you can to protect your skin from skin cancer. Each year over one million Americans are treated for skin cancer. One percent of these diagnoses are melanoma. Melanoma is the deadliest of the skin cancers, but if caught and treated early, the survival rates are quite heartening with a 98 percent survival rate for a localized cancer. That means it would have been caught before it had time to spread.

Melanoma has a survival rate after five years of 92 percent. This survival rate means that after five years, 92 percent of those treated for melanoma are still alive. This rate does not take into consideration if they have had a reoccurrence of the cancer, are in remission or cancer-free, just that they are still alive. Fortunately over 80 percent of all melanomas are treated while still at the localized stage. The survival rates for melanomas that are only treated once they have spread are not as hopeful at 64 percent. Regardless, this is better than they were and one should always be encouraged to beat the odds.

Skin cancer has become the most common cancer to affect people in the United States and now accounts for half the cancer treated in a typical year. Those most likely to develop skin cancer are those who are fair skinned, with blond or red hair and light colored eyes. You are also at a higher risk for it if you have a family history of skin cancer, had several severe sunburns in your childhood, and spend excessive amounts of time in the sun, especially at peak hours, with no sunscreen. In addition, those who have jobs that expose them to coal tar, creosote or arsenic have an increased risk.

Also at a higher risk are people who are HIV positive, though they are more likely to develop Kaposi's sarcoma, another deadly form of skin cancer. As well, anyone who has large dark colored birthmarks is at higher risk. These birthmarks are known as congenital melanocytic nevus.

The key is noticing something that looks wrong or was not previously there and treating it quickly. Perform a self-examination every few months to help make sure nothing has changed. But just as important is working hard to be smart about sun exposure and work hard on the prevention of skin cancer. Only you can take care of your body and limit the threats of ultraviolet rays to your skin.