

Too Much Sun and Musky Fishing

By: Phil Gutmann

Musky fishing..... an outdoor sport that has been growing by leaps and bounds over the last two decades. As more and more people get involved, it seems we spend so much time and money on the newest and best boats, motors, rods, reels, lures and our favorite trip destinations for the upcoming season, we tend to forget to take care of ourselves. I admit, as most all of you can, we do not spend enough time nor money on exercising, eating healthier and visiting our favorite physician other than when we are sick.

Due to some past family medical history, I do visit my physician on an annual or at least every other year basis for a complete physical with lab work. However, during the month of March/April 2005, my outlook on life and my health was thrown a big curveball which I was not ready for. During a recent complete health physical, my doctor took notice of an area on my back right shoulder that did not look like a normal mole. He performed a quick procedure and sent the mole sample in for a diagnosis. The lab results were not what I wanted to hear. I had a Type II Melanoma Skin Cancer. Though this type and stage of cancer is curable, the word "cancer" is a medical and dictionary word that most all individuals have a hard time grasping and dealing with. I recently had the necessary surgical procedure to remove any possible infected area left by the skin cancer and was relieved to find out that it had not spread.

I am writing this article not to scare all of you but yet to try and share some basic information concerning this disease which can affect each and every one of us no matter how young or how old we are.

What is Melanoma Skin Cancer?

The skin we have is the largest organ in the body. It covers and protects our internal organs. It also protects our body against germs and prevents the loss of too much water and other fluids. Our skin also sends messages to the brain about heat, cold, touch and pain. The skin itself is made up of three layers (outside in): the epidermis, the dermis and the subcutis. Most the skin problems we encounter and see affect the epidermis layer. Yes, all those freckles, moles and peeling skin from those bad sunburns are part of this

layer of skin we have. Also, within this epidermis layer is a type of cell called a “melanocytes”. These are the cells that produce the pigment called melanin and give us our tan or brown color to our skin that protects the deeper layers of the skin. But it is here that the problems of Melanoma Skin Cancer start to appear. Because these “melanocyte cells” continue to produce melanin, the tumors of concern will tend to be a darker brown or even black in color and will noticeably be a different shape than other skin characteristics nearby. Enough of the science class at this point.

So what does Melanoma Skin Cancer have to do with musky fishing? Plenty!!!! The main reason is we are all outdoors enjoying this great passion of chasing and catching “fish with teeth” in the sun. Yes, the sun itself is one of the biggest risk factors for developing Melanoma Skin Cancer but there are many other risk factors that you need to be made aware of also. These include:

Moles: A mole is a benign skin tumor. Certain types or those that have lots of moles (which I do) and those individuals that have some large moles, have an increased risk factor.

Fair Skin: People with fair skin, freckling, light hair or blue eyes have increased risk but realize ANYONE can get melanoma.

Family History: A family history of breast or ovarian cancer means certain gene changes (mutations) are present. Around 10% of people with melanoma have a close relative with the disease (mother, father, sister, brother).

Immune Suppression: People who have been treated with medicines to suppress the immune system are at risk.

UV Radiation: Here comes the Sun. Yes, too much exposure is a higher risk for melanoma. Tanning lamps and booths are just as bad (sorry ladies!).

Age: About 50% of melanomas occur in people over the age of 50 but younger people of any age can get them (by the way I am 43).

Gender: Men have a higher risk factor than women (sorry guys!).

Xeroderma Pigmentosum (XP): This is a rare, inherited condition. People with XP are less able to repair damage to their skin caused by sunlight.

Past History: A person who has already had melanoma has a higher risk of developing another melanoma in the future.

With so many risk factors, how can I still enjoy being outdoors, even if I am not musky fishing on my favorite lake? The answer to this question was probably summed up best by my surgeon as “moderation and a lot of common sense with sun safety”. Here are a few pointers to always remember:

1. Limit the amount of sunlight your skin is exposed to during any given day particularly between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. This is when the UV light is the strongest. The important thing here is to be aware that sunlight reflects off water, clouds, sand, concrete, snow and can even reach below the water’s surface.
2. Your clothing while fishing is very important also. Any day on the water should include a long sleeve shirt and a hat with a broad brim. Fabrics with a tight weave and dark colors generally provide best protection. Today, we are now seeing specialized fishing apparel that incorporate materials that reflect UV light but yet keep you cool and comfortable. One clothing line I have seen recently being offered is from Columbia. Baseball-style caps are good in protecting the head but not the ears and neck.
3. Sunscreens are a must!!! These are tools (just like your muskie baits) and must be used in accordance with the directions for maximum effectiveness. Areas to be covered include your face, ears, neck, arms, hands, legs or any part of your skin you will be exposing to sunlight. Also, they must be re-applied throughout the day due to sweating or swimming. And do not forget your lips. Lip balms including sunscreen are now available. Sunscreens you bought last year should be thrown away and new ones purchased for this year. Look for products that protect both UVA and UVB, the two most damaging forms of UV radiation. SPF factors of 15 or greater are recommended. Sunscreens should also be used on hazy days or days with broken light or cloud cover.

4. A wrap-around style of sunglasses labeled as blocking UVA and UVB light and 99-100% UV absorption provide the best protection for your eyes and skin around the eyes.
5. Remember, the kids need the same attention as you. Through your diligence, your children will develop good habits of protecting their skin down the road.

Finally, melanoma can be detected early and in most cases curable. This is a disease which does not take days or weeks to develop. In most cases, it is months and years before it appears. Left alone or not noticed can result in more serious forms of cancers developing elsewhere in your body. The best bet is to conduct self-exams of your skin in front of a mirror. Your spouse or significant other can assist with this also in areas you cannot see. The objective here is to take an "inventory of sorts" of your moles, freckles or other marks on your skin. Things to remember are location, shape, size, color and irregularities noticed. If there is an area of concern or changes have occurred, see your physician or a qualified dermatologist for an exam. We all want to live life to the fullest, enjoying our family and friends and the great sport of musky fishing. Take care of your skin and I hope to see you on the water this season!

For a complete understanding of this type of cancer and others, please visit the American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org.