

# GO BIG MED

## Anyone Can Get Melanoma

*By David Watts, MD, Nebraska Medical Association Board Member*

Bob Franklin's wife had been asking him to get a mole on his back checked for a while. The 75 year old, healthy, active Husker fan felt disbelief at first when the biopsy showed melanoma skin cancer. He hadn't had his shirt off outdoors for over 45 years, or ever visited an indoor tanning salon.

But Bob is a light-skinned guy who sunburned before tanning while growing up. In his 20's he worked as a roofer, often without a shirt. He remembers getting "brown as a berry," as well as having had a few "bad burns" as a kid.

The Surgeon General's 2014 skin cancer report estimates that as many as 90 percent of melanomas are caused by ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or tanning beds. Bob's melanoma likely started with sun damage to his skin cells as a young man. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation, even without a burn, injures the DNA in skin cells, which can lead to cancer.

As with other exposures that cause cancer, the risk for melanoma from UV damage accumulates through life. So older men, who are outside on average more than women, and don't protect their skin as well, get more melanomas. The tricky thing is that the cancers often show up on areas of the body that may not have been exposed to UV for years.

Young women get melanoma too, as UNL sophomore Paige Grogan found out. Just before she left for college, her mom took her to the doctor to have a mole removed from her leg. Three weeks later, her mom sat with her and explained that the mole was cancerous. Paige needed more surgery. Her mom asked her not to look up "melanoma" on the internet because she didn't want Paige to be scared. Luckily, they caught her cancer very early and got it treated quickly.

Paige had used indoor tanning to feel less self-conscious about her body and fair skin when she performed in dance and other events. Her mom had also tanned indoors, and allowed Paige to start indoor tanning at age 14 to help her feel more confident. They both now regret those decisions. The American Cancer Society reports that women who tan indoors are **SIX TIMES** more likely to get melanoma before age 30 than non-tanners. The UV radiation in tanning beds can be many times stronger than UV rays in natural sunlight. The stronger the rays, the higher the risk.

Paige says her cancer changed her life, and she tries to use the impressive scar on her leg to educate her classmates and policy makers about the dangers of tanning. Many of her friends still tan, thinking what happened to her won't happen to them. However, according to the

CDC, over the last five years Nebraska women under 50 are getting melanomas at several times the national average.

Paige and her mom would like to see Nebraska law protect minors from indoor tanning, in the same way that minors in Nebraska can't purchase other harmful products like alcohol or tobacco.

Two thirds of melanomas become visible as new spots, and a third show up as changes in a previous spot. Melanomas are usually dark, sometimes have different colors, are often unevenly pigmented and irregular-shaped, and can be either flat or raised. They can also sometimes be pink, round and innocent-looking. Any new or changing skin spot is suspect, and staying alert is key.

**ANYONE** old or young, male or female, can get melanoma, even people with dark skin. People who have fair skin, freckles or many moles face the highest risk. And the more hours spent in the sun or tanning beds, even without burning, the higher the chances of getting skin cancer.

If you see a suspicious spot on yourself or someone else, even if it is in a rarely exposed area, please consult your doctor. Bob and Paige were fortunate that their cancers were caught early, and had not spread. Others are not so lucky. Once it spreads, melanoma is often fatal. But when diagnosed and treated early, most melanomas are highly curable.

It's also smart to have your skin checked by your doctor even if you are not aware of any concerning spots. As in football, knowing your opponent gives you a winning edge.