

THE SKIN CANCER FOUNDATION

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*Sun
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"That's Not Our Disease."

As skin cancer rates rise in Hispanics, many remain unaware they are at risk.

Adelle T. Quintana, MD

Only pale-skinned, blue-eyed Caucasians get skin cancer. That's a misconception many Hispanics in the US share. Just ask actress Eva Longoria. Speaking out in May 2013 on behalf of L'Oreal Paris and the Melanoma Research Alliance, she said: "Sometimes Latinas like myself, and other women of color, have this false perception that we aren't at risk for skin cancer, when in fact... melanoma is increasing for us and can be more deadly."

While Hispanics have lower skin cancer rates than non-Hispanic whites, their incidence of the disease has been soaring. From 1992 to 2008, melanoma cases in Hispanics in the US rose by 19 percent.¹ Melanoma is also being diagnosed in Hispanics at younger ages and at later stages, when it is deadlier.

As the US Hispanic population has skyrocketed in recent years, increasing by 43 percent from 2000 to 2010, the need to educate this very diverse community – and their health care providers – on skin cancer prevention and detection has become critical.¹ But barriers exist: believing they are immune to skin cancer, too many Hispanics continue to practice risky behaviors, such as not wearing sunscreen, not seeking shade, and using tanning beds. For lower income Hispanics, lack of access to medical care contributes to the problem, leaving them with lower skin cancer awareness; this can lead to later diagnosis.



A Wide Range of Skin Types

Hispanics may think of themselves as a darker-skinned people, but they encompass a broad range of skin types, from very dark Type VI skin to very light Type I skin. All of those skin types are at risk for skin cancer. Light-skinned individuals are at higher risk because they have less melanin in their skin, and melanin serves as a partial natural barrier against UV rays. But having more melanin does not make one immune to sun damage or skin cancer. Even the darkest skin provides a natural sun protection factor (SPF) of less than 15, the minimum SPF for an effective sunscreen.

Prey to All Major Skin Cancers

As in Caucasians, the most common form of skin cancer in Hispanics is basal cell carcinoma (BCC), found most frequently on the face and neck because these areas receive the most sun exposure. A study from Howard University found that 89 percent of BCCs on naturally brown skin occur on the head or neck.^{2,3} Though BCCs rarely metastasize, Hispanic patients who develop them are more likely to have multiple lesions, either at first diagnosis or in ensuing years.

Squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) are the second most

common skin cancer in Hispanics,³ and melanomas the third. Evidence suggests that the trunk and legs are the most likely sites in fair-skinned Hispanics, and the feet the most common location in dark-skinned Hispanics.⁴ The latter are prone to a rare, virulent form of melanoma called acral lentiginous melanoma, found most often on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, and under the skin of toenails. Light and medium-skinned Latinos, on the other hand, are more likely to have the more common superficial spreading melanoma.⁵

Cultural Complexities in Learning Sun Safety

Only if Hispanics come to understand that they are at risk will they fully embrace their need for sun protection. A recent survey showed they are giving short shrift to sun safety:

- More than 43 percent reported that they never or rarely use sunscreen.
- Only 24 percent said they wear sun-protective clothing.
- Nearly 40 percent said they sunbathe, and one in three said they sunburned in the past year.¹

Oddly, rather than gaining knowledge about the need for sun protection, more assimilated Hispanics in the US appear to be embracing this culture's tanning obsession. The study, appearing in *JAMA Dermatology*, compared sun protection behaviors among Hispanics in the Southern and Western US who used English as their primary language (and thus were more assimilated), and those who spoke only Spanish; assimilated Hispanics engaged in more risky sun behaviors. English-speaking Hispanics were less likely to seek shade and wear sun-protective clothing and more likely to report sunbathing and indoor tanning, according to the study.¹ "The English-aculturated Hispanics are more likely to be exposed to prevailing beliefs and behaviors in the US that sometimes promote sunbathing and the tanning experience," said the study's lead author Elliot Coups, PhD, of the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

The study also indicated that messaging to the Hispanic community needs to be tailored to varied language and cultural backgrounds. Some Hispanics respond to "family-based" messaging as opposed to individualized messaging, noted Coups. Fotonovelas, photo-based comics used throughout Latin American to spread public health messages, may especially appeal to some US Hispanics, and in general, skin cancer materials should include images of Hispanics. "Otherwise, they may think 'this may not apply to me because I don't see anyone like me,'" said Coups. Coups' team is starting a project to study the sun-protective habits of His-

panic day laborers in New Brunswick, NJ, with the goal of developing an educational curriculum for this population.

Earlier Detection: a Matter of Life or Death

Even fewer Hispanics are doing or seeking skin exams than are protecting their skin from the sun. A recent study in North Carolina found that more than three-quarters of Hispanic patients are not performing skin self-exams and only nine percent receive a regular skin exam from their doctors.⁵ "We found that patients felt they didn't have enough time with physicians to ask about preventive care such as skin exams," said Aida Lugo-Somolinos, MD, professor of dermatology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "We also learned that physicians were not taking the opportunity to raise the subject with their patients."

One thing that would help physicians in reaching out to Hispanics would be offering materials in Spanish, asserts Maritza I. Perez, MD, Director of Cosmetic Dermatology at St. Luke's Roosevelt Medical Center and Associate Director of Procedural Dermatology at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. "There is a lack of information," notes Dr. Perez. "If they need to hear it in Spanish, we need to have materials in their language." But first, she says, health care practitioners working in heavily populated Hispanic communities need to be better educated themselves about Hispanics' risk of skin cancer and their need for skin exams.

To date, the knowledge gap is leading to later detection. A recent study of melanoma cases in Dade County, FL, found that late-stage melanoma diagnoses were more common in Hispanic (26 percent) and black (52 percent) patients than in non-Hispanic white patients (16 percent).⁶ The racial disparity suggests that Hispanics (and blacks) are not engaging in secondary prevention measures such as skin exams, and that they lack sufficient access to health care.

Hispanics, Heal Thyselves!

As skin cancer rates rise among Hispanics, it's imperative for them to understand they are at risk even if they have dark complexions, notes Dr. Lugo-Somolinos. That will make them more likely to practice sun protection.

"Hispanics have to take responsibility for their own skin health," adds Dr. Perez, Associate Clinical Professor of Dermatology at Mount Sinai Icahn School of Medicine. "They need to examine their whole skin monthly, see a dermatologist once or twice a year, use sun protection for anti-aging and anti-cancer purposes, and educate their children to do the same."

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