

Skin Cancer Prevention for Farmers

Frederick N. Bebe, Assistant Research Professor



Close up image of a suspicious mole - Courtesy iStock.

Cancer of the skin is the most common of all cancers. The last 30 years have seen a significant increase in the incidence of skin cancer in the U.S., faster than any other cancer.

Melanoma accounts for only about 1% of skin cancers but causes a large majority of skin cancer deaths. The American Cancer Society estimates that about 96,480 new melanomas will be diagnosed in the U.S. in 2019.

Melanoma incidence rate (IR) for Kentucky (26.9%) is higher than that of the U.S. (21.8%) and highest in predominantly agricultural regions of the state. Average mortality rate (MR) in Kentucky for the 2012-2016 period was 1,388 (U.S. 77,698).

The risk of melanoma increases with age. Melanoma is more than 20 times more common in white people than in African Americans. However, IR and MR among minorities and people younger than 30 have been steadily increasing.

Agricultural occupations are mostly outdoor. Farmers are therefore at higher risk for developing skin cancer because they are often exposed to excessive amounts of sun. Overwhelming evidence suggests that sun exposure over time and sensitivity of an individual's skin to ultraviolet (UV) radiation are the most important risk factors for skin cancer. Thus, farmers and agricultural workers comprise an important audience for messages that address sun protection practices. The following tips and protective measures help to prevent skin cancer:

1. **Avoid** too much ultraviolet light via sun or tanning beds.
2. **Use sunscreen.** Choose "broad spectrum" product. For more protection, go for a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15.
3. **Cover up.** Wear tight-woven clothing and a wide-brim hat, sunglasses, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants.
4. **Seek shade** indoors or under trees.
5. **Avoid tanning beds.** Tanning beds should not be used by anyone under 18. The young are more susceptible to UV radiation.
6. Check the **UV index.** Sun protection is recommended when UV levels are 3 or higher. Avoid working outdoors in the middle of the day when ultraviolet rays are at their highest.
7. **Parents** need to stress the importance of sunscreens and covering up while working outdoors.

8. Someone who has many **moles** is more likely to develop melanoma.
9. People with **fair skin** that freckles or burns easily are at increased risk.
10. About 10% of all people with melanoma have a **family history** of the disease. Risk of melanoma is higher if one or more of your first-degree relatives has had melanoma.

Skin cancer is a preventable disease and the majority of skin cancers can be successfully treated, if found early. Be familiar with your skin and aware of any changes or any suspicious lumps or spots. Don't just rely on an annual skin check.



Dermatologist examining the skin on the back of a patient
- Courtesy iStock.

References:

1. Bebe, F. N., Hu, S., Brown, T. L., and Tulp, O. L. Metastatic melanoma in Florida, 1996-2010: Racial, demographic, occupational and tumor characteristics, and burden of metastasis. *Our Dermatology Online Journal* 9(4):369-379, 2018.
2. SEER Cancer Stat Facts: Melanoma of the Skin. National Cancer Institute. Bethesda, MD, <http://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/melan.html>, 2019.
3. Kentucky Cancer Registry. Cancer Incidence and Mortality in Kentucky, University of Kentucky Lexington, KY 2014.
4. American Cancer Society. Cancer Facts and Figures, 2019. Atlanta GA.
5. USDA, NASS Kentucky Field Office. County Ranking; Kentucky leading agricultural counties, 2009.
6. Hu S, Parmet Y, Allen G, Parker D F, Ma F, Rouhani P, and Kirsner R S Disparity in Melanoma. *Arch. Dermatol.* 145:12, 1369-1374, 2009.
7. Tomba R. Skin Cancer: Nine things to know to lower your risk. <https://www.fredhutch.org/en/news/center-news/2015/07/9-things-to-lower-skin-cancer-risk.html>, 2015.
8. Hadmin F. Skin Cancer Prevention. National Center for Farmer Health. <https://www.farmerhealth.org.au/page/health-centre/skin-cancer-prevention>, 2017.