March 28, 2011

One sunburn can ignite a lifelong battle against cancer.

“I would burn on Saturday and Sunday, peel by Wednesday and be back on the water by the next Saturday doing the same thing,” says Thomas Randall, a man in his 70s who spent much of his youth at a lake or a beach trying to tan a pale complexion. But countless hours of sun exposure have taken a toll on his skin, and he now needs regular examinations to search for pre-cancerous moles.

“I had two moles cut off my chest and a major incision on my left leg to remove another mole,” Kendall says. He’s also had lesions removed from his face and both ears.

“Studies have shown that just one blistering sunburn will increase the likelihood that a person will develop skin cancer,” says Craig Elmets, M.D., chair of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Dermatology and Comprehensive Cancer Center senior scientist.

The sun's ultraviolet light can damage unshielded skin and cause pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions, like basal-cell carcinomas and melanomas. But, Elmets says, people can avoid the potentially deadly disease by protecting their skin from the sun.

Sunscreen should be worn daily and re-applied often, Elmets says, even if the sky is cloudy. A hat and sunglasses with 100 percent UV protection also protect against melanoma, a form of skin cancer than can occur anywhere on the body, even in the eye.

Equally important — keep a check on your moles.

"Moles can change subtly and quickly, so anyone with a personal or family history of melanoma should be monitored," says Wendy Cantrell, C.R.N.P. Cantrell examines patients at the UAB Pigmented Lesion Clinic, which uses photographic mole-mapping to prevent and detect skin cancer. Patients' entire bodies are photographed, and the photos are used to recognize any changes in their moles.

Elmets' research focuses on drug-based skin-cancer prevention. In 2010 Elmets demonstrated the drug Celebrex may help prevent some non-melanoma skin cancers. Now, he is investigating other medications that could keep skin cancer from developing in patients who are considered high risk due to a personal or family history of the disease.

“Our studies are preliminary, but they have been very encouraging and we’ve found that the medications we’ve tested cause a 50 to 60 percent reduction in skin-cancer development,” Elmets says.

Randall says if he knew then what he knows now, “I would have not done what I did. I’m paying my dues today.”

For patient information, please visit www.uabmedicine.org .