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Summer often brings with it fun in the sun, but for cancer patients it also presents new challenges and the need for additional protection.

“Cancer patients may be more at risk for sun damage because of their treatment,” says Elizabeth Kvale, M.D., director of outpatient supportive care and survivorship in the Department of Medicine at University of Alabama at Birmingham and associate scientist in the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Cancer patients should adhere to the basic sun-protection guidelines: Wear sunscreen and protective clothing in the hot, summer months. The American Society of Clinical Oncologists (ASCO) recommends skin cancer patients also should take special care to protect areas of skin being treated; dark, tightly woven fabrics are most effective.

“Skin that has been treated with radiation therapy may lose some of its natural protective capacity because of the changes that occur with treatment,” says Kvale. “Radiation-exposed skin should be completely protected from sun exposure.”

Patients receiving chemotherapy also are more sensitive to the sun's rays. Kvale says it is important to cover surgical scars because they may darken if exposed to the sun, and patients who lose their hair during treatment should protect the scalp because it can burn easily.

"Pediatric cancer patients, survivors and their caregivers should be especially attentive to sun safety," adds Kvale. Studies have shown that extended exposure to the sun is linked to the development of skin cancers for everyone, and children have a significantly elevated risk of developing serious skin cancer as a long-term consequence from sunburn.

Heat is also an enemy to cancer patients, who may be more susceptible to dehydration or heat exhaustion from side-effects of cancer treatment, such as vomiting, diarrhea and nausea. Patients should drink fluids throughout the day, chew on ice chips to relieve dry mouth, avoid beverages with alcohol or caffeine and eat fruits and vegetables with high fluid content.

About the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center

The UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center is among the 40 cancer centers in the nation to meet the stringent criteria for the National Cancer Institute's comprehensive designation. The center is a leader in groundbreaking research, reducing cancer disparities and leading-edge patient care.