

The Importance of Skin Cancer Awareness among Hispanics

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Short Commentary

This commentary begins with a case vignette.

A 25 year old hispanic woman without past medical history presents to the emergency department with a 1 day history of right arm weakness. On initial physical examination her neurologic exam was positive for right arm diminished strength and a 8 mm lesion with irregular borders and variegated color. Computed tomography (CT) of the brain revealed 3 irregular masses with moderate surrounding edema. Pathological examination of the brain masses showed metastatic melanoma. The patient was referred to the cancer center for further studies.

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States today, and its incidence is on the rise among Hispanics individuals despite the “skin cancer immunity myth” in this population mainly due to 2 important problems: [1] low likelihood to practice “skin protective behavior”, and [2] the low rates of skin self-examinations.

Misconceptions such being “tan” and attractiveness beliefs, low socioeconomic status, limited access to healthcare contribute to the soaring melanoma incidence among hispanics, who have a substantially higher proportion of melanomas diagnosed at a later stage than non-Hispanic whites [1].

Epidemiologic and experimental data strongly support a role for sun exposure (particularly sunburn at a young age) in the development of melanoma [2], without neglecting mechanisms mediated by processes other than direct absorption of ultraviolet light by DNA that play important roles in the development of the disease.

What is the role of the primary care doctor in the fight against skin cancer?

The answer is prevention. We live in an extremely competitive and fast-paced society that places a premium on a youthful and healthy appearance. The preservation of healthy and attractive skin is of great value to the happiness and well being of our patients. Health providers should counsel patients on the harms of UVA radiation like DNA damage, formation of dark patches, wrinkles, loose skin and premature aging and UVB radiation that has been linked to eye damage, including cataracts, macular degeneration and photokeratitis that can cause temporary vision loss.

Help us stay protected by reminding your patients to avoid sunburn and suntan, to seek shade during the day specially between 10 am to 4 pm, we often recommend to increase the hours of outdoors physical activities in our patients, just remember to add that it should be done in a sun-safe manner by wearing protective clothes, a hat, sunglasses, and most important a broad spectrum sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB of at least sun protective factor (SPF) 30.

Monthly self skin checks can help detect skin problems early, while researchers work on unraveling the dynamic behavior of skin cancer.

References

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