

In The Spirit of Health

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
MD Anderson
Cancer Center
Making Cancer History®

"I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you." - 3 John 1:2

Stage IV melanoma survivor: Dark skin won't protect you from skin cancer

By Juanita Taylor



I've always been aware of my body. So, when something goes awry, I pay attention and think, "I need to call somebody about this." And I do. That's what's kept me alive for 76 years, by the grace of God. And that's why I was so surprised to be diagnosed with stage IV melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer, in May 2009.

The weirdest thing about my melanoma diagnosis is that it wasn't found on my skin. The tumor was buried deep inside my left lung. Nobody really knows where it started, either, because that's the only place the cancer ever developed.

The only reason I discovered it at all was because I had an X-ray on Mother's Day. I'd had a little cough for a while. But when I started having trouble breathing, I called an ambulance. The EMTs checked me out and couldn't find anything wrong. They took me to a local ER just to be safe.

A technician there said he could see a little shadow on my chest X-ray. That led to a biopsy, which showed it was melanoma. I was stunned. As a Black female, I remember thinking that my diagnosis didn't make any sense.

I grew up playing outside all the time and never gave the sun any thought. But I also knew that melanoma is normally external and it's fairly rare among people of color.

My doctor insisted that the tumor was melanoma, and that I needed lung surgery to remove it. So, I had that done near my home in Pensacola. The doctors said that while they were confident they'd removed all the cancer and it hadn't spread anywhere else, I still needed to be monitored regularly. I chose to do that at MD Anderson. With Gods' help, and their expert attention to detail, I've been cancer-free for 15 years.

I'm proof that having dark skin won't protect you from skin cancer. So, today, I don't take anything for granted. I wear a hat and long sleeves any time I go outside. And, I try to avoid the sun whenever I'm outdoors for any extended length of time.

I also tell people to practice sun safety regardless of their skin color. Be aware of your body and investigate quickly if anything seems off. Don't dismiss or be afraid of what you notice. And, don't listen to the naysayers who say you can't get thus-n-such just because you have dark skin.

"Be aware of your body and investigate quickly if anything seems off." - Juanita Taylor, Survivor

If you have questions about In the Spirit of Health, e-mail Community@MDAnderson.org or call **713-792-3363**.

4 skin safety tips for skin of color,

from MD Anderson Dermatologist, Saira George, M.D.

1 Skin safety is not only about skin cancer. Pigmentation problems are much more common in people with darker skin and the sun makes them much worse. Too much sun exposure is also one of the biggest causes of early aging for people of all skin tones. As well as this, some medications and medical conditions can make skin more sensitive to the sun.

2 Pick a sunscreen designed for your skin. Now sunscreens are available in lots of different formulations for all different skin types. "One of my favorite options for patients with skin of color are tinted mineral sunscreens. They help even out skin tone and prevent hyperpigmentation while also protecting the skin from skin cancer," says George.

3 Watch for changes on your skin. "Skin cancer among people of color is often misdiagnosed or diagnosed at a later stage because they are uncommon," says George. No matter the color of your skin, watch for unusual spots, or new or changing moles using the ABCs of melanoma and report them to your doctor.

4 Find your sweet spot. "Everyone's signals and alarms go off at different levels of sun exposure so what's most important is to know your skin," George says. "Then you can take simple steps to protect your skin like seeking shade, using sunscreen, and wearing a hat or protective clothing."

"If you have skin of color, you've been gifted some natural protection, but that has limits,"

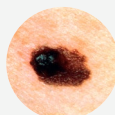
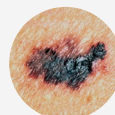


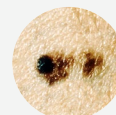
Saira George, M.D.
Physician

Faith without works is dead

- James 2:14

Check your skin for these signs of skin cancer and report any changes to your doctor right away.

Examine your **moles** using the ABCs

A	B	C	D	E
Asymmetry	Border	Color	Diameter	Evolution
				
The two sides look different from each other.	The border is crooked, jagged or irregular.	The mole is multi-colored.	The width is more than 6 millimeters, the size of a pencil eraser.	The mole has changed in size, shape or feeling.

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