

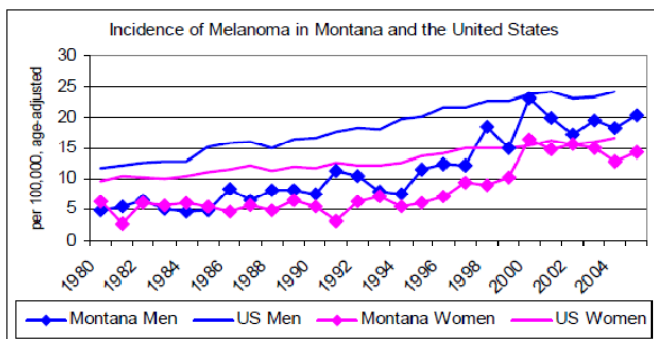
Skin Cancer Basics

Skin cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the skin. The skin is the body's largest organ. It protects against heat, sunlight, injury, and infection. The skin has several layers: the two main layers are the epidermis (upper or outer layer), which is made up of squamous cells, basal cells and melanocytes; and the dermis (lower or inner layer), which contains blood and lymph vessels, hair follicles, and glands.

There are several types of skin cancer. The most common types of skin cancer are squamous cell carcinoma and basal cell carcinoma, which forms in the basal cells; both are also called nonmelanoma skin cancers. Melanoma, which forms in the melanocytes, is a less common but far more serious type of skin cancer. Squamous and basal cell skin cancer can occur anywhere on the body, but it is most common in skin that is often exposed to sunlight, such as the face, neck, hands, and arms.¹ Melanoma often occurs in skin that is not regularly exposed to the sun.

Melanoma of the skin is more common among Whites than American Indians in Montana.² Ultraviolet (UV) radiation affects everyone, but people who have fair skin that freckles or burns easily are at greater risk. These people often also have red or blond hair and light-colored eyes. But even people who tan can get skin cancer.¹ Caucasians are most susceptible to skin cancer, but everyone, regardless of skin color, is at risk.³

The incidence of malignant melanoma has been increasing in Montana and the United States for the past 25 years. Montana's reported incidence rates have been lower than the national rates for most of this period. Men are more likely to develop malignant melanoma than women, possibly because they are more likely to have greater sun exposure.²



Tanning & Burning

A tan does not indicate good health. A tan is a response to injury, because skin cells signal that they have been hurt by the sun's UV rays by producing more pigment. People burn or tan depending on their skin type, the time of year, and the amount of time they have spent in the sun. Although everyone's skin can be damaged by too much sunlight, people with skin types that always or easily burn and tan never or minimally are at the highest risk.⁴

Skin Cancer Prevention

By far the most common risk factor for all types of skin cancer is exposure to the sun and other sources of ultraviolet radiation. UV radiation is part of the spectrum of energy from the sun, and also of artificial sources such as sun lamps and tanning beds.

The risk for developing skin cancers of all types begins early in life and the effects of exposure to UV radiation are cumulative. Children should be protected from the sun from an early age and protective measures should continue throughout the teen and adult years.²

Protection from sun exposure is important all year round, not just during the summer or at the beach. UV rays can reach you on cloudy and hazy days, as well as bright and sunny days. UV rays also reflect off of surfaces like water, cement, sand and snow.⁴

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends easy options for sun protection:

- Use sunscreen with sun protective factor (SPF) 15 or higher, and both UVA and UVB protection.
- Wear clothing to protect exposed skin.
- Wear a hat with a wide brim to shade the face, head, ears and neck.
- Wear sunglasses that wrap around and block as close to 100% of both UVA and UVB rays as possible.
- Seek shade, especially during midday hours.

1. National Cancer Institute "Skin Cancer Prevention PDQ" and "What You Need to Know About Skin Cancer" www.cancer.gov
2. Quarterly Surveillance Report: July 2007, Volume 2007, Number 3. Montana Cancer Control Section, Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services
3. The Skin Cancer Foundation "Skin Cancer and Skin of Color" www.skincancer.org
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention "Basic Information About Skin Cancer" www.cdc.gov

