Cancer and the Summer Months

Listen to theCancer.Net Podcast: Cancer and the Summer Months[1], adapted from this content.

Summertime brings sun, heat, and outdoor activities that may present challenging health and lifestyle issues for people living with cancer. To enjoy the summer while staying safe, follow these tips:

Limit sun exposure. For people undergoing cancer treatment, too much sun may be unsafe. For example, intense sun exposure may further weaken the immune system in a person receiving chemotherapy. In addition, sun exposure while undergoing chemotherapy with fluorouracil (5-FU, Adrucil) may lead to more intense skin reactions and possible sunburns. People undergoing radiation therapy or just finishing treatment should also avoid the sun because skin exposed to radiation therapy is very sensitive to the sun's rays. Consider the following precautions when outside in the sun:

- Limit sun exposure from 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM, which is when the sun's rays are the most intense. Schedule any outdoor activities for early or late in the day. Spend time in the shade, whenever possible.
- Use a broad spectrum sunscreen (offers protection against both ultraviolet A [UVA] and ultraviolet B [UVB] rays) with a solar protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher and reapply it often, especially after sweating or swimming. Ask the doctor to recommend a sunscreen for sensitive skin, in case the sunscreen further irritates skin that has been exposed to radiation therapy.
- Protect the area of skin being treated. Dark, tightly woven fabrics offer better sun protection than light, thin, and loosely woven materials.
- Protect your head and ears with a broad brimmed hat. If you have lost your hair, the exposed skin will burn easily.
- Keep surgical scars well-covered. If scars are exposed to the sun, especially newer scars, the sun will eventually darken the scars.

Avoid dehydration. Some side effects of cancer treatment, such as vomiting, diarrhea, and nausea, may cause dehydration. Signs of dehydration include:

- Dry mouth, thirst
- Fatigue and weakness
- Weak or cramped muscles
- Dizziness, headaches, or feeling forgetful or confused
- Fever
- Very dark urine or less frequent urination
- Swollen, cracked, or dried tongue
- Sunken eyes that don't naturally produce tears

Ways to prevent dehydration:

- Drink before becoming thirsty. Try to drink at least eight glasses of water every day, and drink even more when outside in the heat.
- Drink iced fluids, such as ice water, or low-sugar juices, sports drinks, or frozen ice pops, to both quench thirst and cool down.
- Use ice chips for relief from dry mouth.
- Eat vegetables and fruits with a high fluid content with meals and as snacks.
- Avoid beverages with alcohol or caffeine (such as coffee, tea, and soda).

The heat and humidity of summer may present additional challenges for a person living with cancer, including the following:

Hot flashes. Hot flashes may be a side effect of hormone therapy for women [2] and men [3] who have been treated for cancer and can be triggered by hot weather. The following are some suggestions to cool down and manage hot flashes:

- Wear breathable fabrics that allow sweat to evaporate.
- Keep iced beverages on hand throughout the day and night.
- Lower the thermostat, if possible. Turn on a ceiling fan or use a hand-held, battery-operated fan. A less expensive alternative is to use a manual fan.
- Take a cool shower before bed to manage hot flashes during the hot summer nights. Wear lightweight clothing to bed.
- Consider swimming (as long as the doctor says it's okay to exercise). The water provides a cooling effect, which keeps your temperature down throughout the workout.
- Avoid drinks with alcohol or caffeine, as they may also trigger hot flashes.

Wigs. Wigs often feel hot and itchy in the summer. Cooler options to consider include a cotton head scarf or turban. If you decide to wear a wig in

the summer, you may want to cut your hair short or shave your head while your hair is falling out to keep cool and for a better wig fit. Consider a synthetic wig for the hot summer months for the following reasons:

- Lightweight, synthetic wigs are cooler to wear than natural wigs because their open-cap construction allows the head to breathe and heat to escape.
- Synthetic wigs don't get flat or frizzy in the summer humidity like human hair wigs.
- Synthetic wigs hold their style, even if they get wet.
- The fibers in synthetic wigs don't fade or turn different colors with exposure to the sun.
- Synthetic wigs may be worn with a mesh wig liner that's similar to a fishnet stocking and helps keep your head cool.

Swimming. Swimming is one of the safest and most comfortable ways to begin moderate exercise. Although swimming strengthens the abdomen, back, and shoulders, it can be challenging for women who have had a breast removed to wear a swimsuit that works well with a breast form, or prosthesis [4]. Several bathing suit brands are designed for women with breast cancer that have higher necklines and armholes to conceal scars, and built-in bra pockets for securing breast forms. As an alternative to custom swimsuits, a retailer may be able to add a breast form bra pocket to the inside of a regular bathing suit.

Swim forms are also available to fit in a bra pocket. Swim forms are similar to conventional breast forms, but they are much lighter and more comfortable to wear when swimming. Made from clear silicone, swim forms attach into the bathing suit with fabric tabs, have a built-in pocket, or attach directly to the chest wall with adhesive.

In addition to custom swimsuits, there are special swim caps designed for people undergoing chemotherapy that provide additional protection for sensitive skin.

More Information

Protecting Your Skin from the Sun [5]

The Importance of Hydration [6]

Additional Resources

Breastcancer.org: Summer Treatment Issues [7]

Breastcancer.org: Summer Skin Care [8]

Last Updated: May 02, 2012

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/cancer_and_the_summer_months.mp3
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25257
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25254
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24478
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24659
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24702
[7] http://www.breastcancer.org/tips/seasonal/treatment.jsp
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