

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple A Day, Lake Region Healthcare's Health and Wellness Show, where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I am Katie Johnson, and my guest today is Mary Bressler, here to talk to us about Melanoma Monday. Good morning, Mary.

Mary Bressler: Hi, Katie. Nice to see you again.

Katie Johnson: It's always great to have you on the show and talk about better ways we can care for our skin or treat our skin, and Melanoma Monday is a day that's focused precisely on that, preventing skin cancer. Tell us what Melanoma Monday is and why it's recognized.

Mary Bressler: Melanoma Monday is the first Monday of May every year where the people in the dermatology world have decided to promote skin checks.

Katie Johnson: For someone who hasn't had a skin check before, tell us what's involved with that.

Mary Bressler: When patients come in to see me, I always tell them, "Strip down." I look at the skin and look for changes in the skin and I also will do some education. Oftentimes, the melanomas that I pick up on are the lesions that they do not come in for. Then, what I'll do is I'll educate my patients what to look for because I have had on a rare occasion two or three months down the road, even though they've had a good skin check, things have changed and because of education, they've come back in and we have picked up on, sometimes, not even a melanoma, just a change in their skin, and a different type of skin cancer was picked up.

Katie Johnson: What is skin cancer? Why does it develop? And, what are the different types?

Mary Bressler: Skin cancer is a change in, obviously, the skin. Sometimes like melanoma, there's a change in the DNA and how we reconstruct trauma to the skin or how skin cells change. The thing about melanoma is that it can be a very life-threatening skin cancer, so it's important that you pick up on it. Oftentimes, it is caused by things that we have done in our environment, tanning bed use, high exposure to laying out in the sun. Sometimes, if you're immuno-compromised, you don't have the ability to fight off some of those changes in our skin cells, and so you can in some respect develop melanomas. Then, of course, there is a family history of melanomas, and through the gene pool, there can be some DNA changes that may cause it.

There's other skin cancers out there. I always tell patients, in a playful way, if you wanna order a skin cancer, you would order a basal cell because they are easy to identify, they're easy to treat. They have excellent outcomes, and they, too, hang out in sun-exposed areas and are more visible. Those are probably the most obvious ones. The other one is a squamous cell skin cancer, and I always tell patients that's usually like a little sore that doesn't heal, whereas that one tends to show more damage under the skin, it's not as obvious as a basal cell, but almost all the skin cancers that I see, not all, are in sun-exposed areas.

Katie Johnson: You've mentioned sun exposure. You've mentioned genetics. What are other risk factors? Or, who else would typically be at risk for skin cancer?

Mary Bressler: Well, people like me, if you haven't seen me, red head, pale skin, heavy freckles, in my age group. I'm close to 60. We grew up without any sunscreen availability, a lot of farm kids running around outside with their t-shirts off if they're boys and getting a good sunburn when they were growing up, so that's why we're seeing so many in the age group that I'm in. However, there's a large influx of skin cancers in the female population, and they tend to be in the early to mid 20s.

Katie Johnson: What are the basics of, you mentioned when you're having a consultation with a patient, kind of showing them what to look for, is there some kind of basics you can give our listeners of these are the things you're gonna look for to be proactive about preventing or staving off skin cancer early?

Mary Bressler: What I have patients do is after they leave my office, go home and look. Now, I've told you what's normal, and then see down the road if there's any changes, but if you haven't been in to see me, what I recommend doing is looking in the mirror and seeing if anything stands out. I say it's like a nice field of horses, and in that field is a zebra. Find out where your personal zebra is. Now, that doesn't mean that that's necessarily gonna be the skin cancer that I would be worried about, or the lesion that I would be worried about, but that's a good start.

Then, see if this lesion has irregular borders to it, if it's larger than others, if it's caused you symptoms. Does it itch? Does it bleed? I have to say I have had two melanomas here that didn't look like anything, but they hurt, and when I biopsied them, they were, indeed, a melanoma, and one you couldn't even visually see. It was as lesion that hurt, and I just couldn't let go of it and biopsied it, and sure enough it was.

Katie Johnson: What should someone do if they think they do have a sign of a melanoma then? Or, see something irregular? What's the next step?

Mary Bressler: As we know, or if you don't know, dermatology is very difficult to get into, so it's usually best to start out with your primary care provider. If, however, you don't have a primary care provider, you have a lesion that is bleeding, itching, and it's really scaring you, I think that's one of the joys of having me here is I have a pretty good access availability, and in situations like that, I tend to have a little soft heart, and I tend to get these patients in. It won't be, though, a formal I'm gonna take care of your full body skin issue, but I will look at your lesion.

In fact, just today, I had one, and indeed, it probably could be something like that, and we'll get it taken care on within the next week or so. At least what I did was I gave him comfort that, yes, we'll address this, reassured him yes or no on the path that we're going to take.

Katie Johnson: Most importantly, don't ignore it, whether it's your primary care provider, whether it's you. Find someone to take a look and do something.

Mary Bressler: Yeah, you know your skin better than anybody else, and if something is changing, or if it's of concern, I think it's a good thing to be aware. You know, I would say, once or twice a year, I get a patient in, who just won't let go of the concern, and I just love that type of patient because when they're taking care of their skin, they're paying attention to it, and you know what? I probably should listen to that and do a biopsy, and I would say probably, I wouldn't say 50% of the time, but once in a while I will get one just because of a gut feeling on a patient, and in saying so, I also take off lesions on gut feelings. When you've been doing this long enough, you sometimes know when it just doesn't look right, feel right, just follow your intuition.

Katie Johnson: What can happen if something goes untreated for too long?

Mary Bressler: Well, in a melanoma, unfortunately, they won't go away, and a melanoma, we know that when it gets deeper, then it will go to lymph nodes, and it will go to other organs, and ultimately, down the road, it could cause death, and it's just a matter of where the end stage for that would be. We need to remember though that melanoma is just not on the skin, it can also be isolated in the eye. It's been in the liver, but it seems like for melanoma, all practical purposes, we tend to think skin first. I think it's just really important to be aware and especially when we have the tanning bed generation still out there.

I always tell patients and it may sound very, very harsh, but I say it very diplomatic and yet playful way, we know that it's not okay to drive and drink, but somehow we're still under the okay that it's okay to tanning bed use, and what I tell patients without being judgemental that I equate it to driving and drinking as far as consequences that could impact life or death, so, yeah, tanning beds are not a good thing.

Katie Johnson: It's a serious consequence, and beyond tanning beds, our exposure to the sun itself is obviously a factor, and sunscreen is important. Can you shed a little bit of light on that for us and what's important?

Mary Bressler: Yeah, sunscreen's a great thing. The first thing I say is if you absolutely will not use sunscreen, then cover up, and there's some really cute clothing out there now in which you can cover up and make sure that you cover those ears. Like, you have a cute haircut. Girls who have their ears cut out, make sure you get the tops of the ears. If you're a runner, guys who have thinner hair, make sure you wear a hat, and things like that.

When you look at your sunscreen, all I really care about is that you have a SPF of 30 and that you're applying it every two hours. If you're in the water, do it more often. If you're gonna use a spray, you should see the spray on you. I guess, this year, it's really cool, there is a gel out that looks like a deodorant that you can put on. It's

finding a sunscreen that really works for you because some of the sunscreens are actually very difficult to use especially if you're an athlete. So, if you're an athlete, if you tend to use something that has some zinc in it, dropping names here but Solbar makes a great one. You have to order it online, but there are some instances where sunscreens aren't favorable to you, and you have to just find one that really works for you.

Katie Johnson: Any other advice you wanna share with our listeners as they prepare for next Monday, Melanoma Monday or things you wanna encourage them to do on that day?

Mary Bressler: I think even if you look at your partner's skin and vice versa. That might be a really great idea, and then, the next thing I would encourage you to do is go outside and get in the sun. We've all been inside way too much, and the sun is not a bad thing. We need sun. We need it for mental health reasons, but just have respect for the sun. Wear your sunscreen, wear sunglasses when you're out in the sun. Wear long, protective clothing.

You know, I get a light tan. I'm not saying that you have to be a hermit and be scared of the sun. It's just use some smart sun sense.

Katie Johnson: Great advice from Mary Bressler, Lake Region Healthcare's Clinic Services Dermatology Department. Coming up on Melanoma Monday, this Monday, May 7th, encouraging everyone to wear your sunscreen, pay attention to your skin, and if you have any questionable spots to contact your primary care provider or give a call to our clinic and let our health care professionals help guide you down the path to taking the best care of your skin possible. Mary Bressler and Katie Johnson on Apple A Day reminding you there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.