

Script – Print – Pro wrestler grapples with skin cancer

Pro wrestler and actor John Cena admits to never wearing sunscreen when he grew up in Massachusetts. When he later moved to Florida, he still failed to protect his skin from the dangerous rays of the sun.

But a routine visit to a dermatologist quickly changed Cena's attitude. His doctor found a cancerous spot on his chest. A year later, another spot was found near his right shoulder. It was a wake-up call for Cena, who not only applies sunscreen daily now, but he's also become a spokesperson for a sunscreen brand.

Cena said in an interview with PEOPLE that he now feels a responsibility to share the lessons he's learned about skin cancer with others - especially men.

"Men especially are becoming more conscious of self-care," he said. "I just think we need to make it more commonplace."

It's that time of the year when people are outdoors for several reasons – sporting activities, vacations, and working outside jobs.

But under the brilliant sun rays lurks a potential danger especially to men – skin cancer, more specifically melanoma.

More than 97,000 new melanomas will be diagnosed this year (58,120 in men and 39,490 in women), according to the American Cancer Society. Nearly 8,000 people will die from melanoma, the majority – nearly 5,500 of them – will be men.

"Men are more likely to develop skin cancer, in fact twice as likely, to develop melanoma over time because of several different reasons, whether that's related to the type of job that they do because men tend to work outdoors more often," says Ben Guth, a nurse practitioner for OSF HealthCare. "It can be education related where they aren't taught what to look for when it comes to signs and symptoms of skin cancer. And finally, they just don't use sunscreen when they go outside, which is very protective when it comes to sunburns and developing skin cancer in the future."

There are other factors. Some research suggests that women's sun-damaged skin seems to heal better than men. And men tend to have thicker skin, which makes it more susceptible to UV damage which can lead to melanoma.

The good news is that if caught early, melanoma and most skin cancers are highly curable. The problem, however, is most skin cancers don't have symptoms until they reach the later stages. So that makes it even more important to take care of our skin and know what to look for.

It starts with education.

"I think you need to have a well-rounded approach when it comes to protecting yourself from the sun and that education comes, one, from primary care providers and dermatologists," says Guth. "We educate on the importance of sunscreen, applying it every two hours, especially when outside. The American Academy of Dermatologists recommend using at least an SPF of 30 and that being a broad spectrum and even water-resistant, depending on the type of work or activity you're doing outside."

When applying sunscreen, don't forget to lotion up around the ears, behind the neck and on top of the scalp, especially men who are balding. Ask your partner for a hand to get to those hard-to-reach spots.

While not everyone is a fan of sunscreen lotion, don't despair. There are other ways to help keep your skin protected this summer.

"There several other options if you don't like sunscreen or the greasy feel on your skin – wearing long sleeve shirts and pants, especially those that block sun, wearing a big hat, whether that's a baseball cap or a wide-brimmed hat with sunglasses," says Guth. "And you can also find areas of shade or protection from the sun especially during those high times where the sun is most strong, especially between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m."

Guth strongly recommends men make a standing appointment for a skin checkup.

"If you have a dermatologist, it's good to have annual skin checks especially if you've had lesions in the past or had skin cancer in the past and had them removed," says Guth. "Outside of that men should just be talking with their provider about their concerns."

Guth adds that if something doesn't look or feels right, talk to your primary care provider or dermatologist. Don't wait. And remember to always pack your sunscreen, even on those cloudy days.

Like smoking, it's never too late to stop ignoring the dangers to our skin. Just ask John Cena.