

Why *Skinny On Skin*?

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As a dermatologist, one of my most common responsibilities is to perform skin cancer screenings for my patients. I often begin by asking, “What brought you in to the office today? Have you noticed anything new or changing on your skin?” It may come as a surprise to learn how often patients will tell me that their hair stylist noticed an unusual mole on their scalp and suggested that they visit a dermatologist. Or that a massage therapist noticed a strange growth on their back and referred them to a dermatologist for evaluation.

A Unique Opportunity

Estheticians and other salon professionals are in a unique position to take note of unusual growths on their client’s skin and initiate an important conversation that may ultimately save a patient’s life! Dr. Neville Davis, an Australian dermatologist wrote, “Melanoma writes its own message in the skin with its own ink, and it is there for all of us to see.” This is a really important message: you DON’T have to go to medical school to know how to spot the warning signs of skin cancer. These warning signs sit right on the skin’s surface, and using a few simple rules, a beauty professional is in a terrific position to be able to recognize them and save a life.

Skin cancer is by far the most common type of cancer around the world. Most (but not all) skin cancers are related to exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun or from artificial light sources like tanning beds. There are three major types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma. Estheticians,

hair stylists, nail technicians, and massage therapists can play an important role in recognizing all three types of skin cancer. Which is why the Melanoma Foundation of New England’s *Skinny On Skin* program is a critical education tool for beauty industry professionals.

The *Skinny on Skin* program is offered as an on-site educational session to groups of salon professionals who take advantage of the MFNE’s commitment to free professional skin cancer education. New England-based hair stylists are invited to register for local *Skinny on Skin* training events online. In addition, *Skinny on Skin* has developed a web-based training platform, allowing salon professionals across the United States to take advantage of this proven educational program without geographic, time, or financial barriers.

The Basics

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common form of skin cancer. These often arise on sun-exposed areas of the body. The face, ears, scalp, and the back of the neck are common locations. Basal cell carcinomas show up as pearly or translucent pink bumps on the surface of the skin. They bleed very easy and do not heal well. When clients tell their hairdressers that they bumped their head three months ago but the site never seemed to heal, it can prompt a salon professional to look more closely. Basal cell carcinomas are curable by surgical removal, but the results can be disfiguring.

Squamous cell carcinomas are often scaly and crustier bumps that also show up on sun exposed areas of the body. These

itchy bumps may crack and bleed easily and commonly appear on the head and neck, ears, forearms, and hands. People may report that they have an itchy, tender bump on their scalp and ask that their hair stylist be careful around the site to avoid irritating it further. With a quick look, a salon professional can confirm the presence of a suspicious spot, open up a conversation with the client, and refer them to a doctor for more precise diagnosis.

Melanoma is less common than basal cell carcinoma or squamous cell carcinoma, but it is potentially deadly if not caught early. Melanoma can occur at any age, but it is becoming more and more common among young women as a result of tanning bed use. Even a single episode of sunburn, especially before the age of 18-years-old, can cause damage to the skin that will later show up as melanoma. Melanomas on the scalp can be among the most deadly form of skin cancer, and hair professionals can play a crucial role in recognizing them early.

If caught in its early stages, melanoma is highly curable. This finding highlights the importance of early skin cancer detection, and salon professionals can play an important role in making this a reality. Hair stylists and other beauty professionals often see their clients on a regular basis and spend much of their visit looking at precisely the areas that are at risk for melanoma. The comfortable, friendly relationship a salon professional frequently has with a client offers the perfect setting for an alert esthetician or massage therapist to encourage the client to seek further medical attention for a potentially deadly skin cancer.

In fact, a 2011 study published in *JAMA Dermatology*¹, showed that, even though very few hair professionals had received any formal skin cancer education, many stylists already informally examine the skin of the head and neck and offer skin care advice as part of their profession. This study showed that salon professionals could be armed with confidence from a skin cancer educational session. Supplement this knowledge with customer information cards that can be offered to clients, and suddenly hair stylists and estheticians are in a terrific position to become health advisors for skin cancer prevention and early detection.

The ABCDEs

Knowing a few simple warning signs of melanoma allows salon professionals to be instrumental in finding early skin cancers and helping clients get help early. The *Skinny on Skin* program asks salon professionals to look for these “ABCDEs” of melanoma.

- A. Asymmetry.** Benign, normal moles should be symmetric. Your attention may be drawn to moles where one half looks very different from the other half. If you mentally draw a line through the middle of a mole, the two sides should match. If they do not, this asymmetry may be an early warning sign for melanoma.
- B. Border irregularity.** Benign moles have a smooth, even border. Your attention might be drawn to a mole with a jagged border. A notched, irregular, blurred or scalloped edge should alert you to the possibility of an early melanoma.
- C. Color.** There is no single color that is worrisome. Some patients have very deeply pigmented moles, while others might be a light reddish brown. The key is that a mole should be evenly colored throughout. A single mole that has multiple colors within it may be a signal for an early melanoma.

D. Diameter. Benign moles are usually less than 6 mm in size. Moles that are larger than a pencil eraser size are thought to be more worrisome for melanoma. Spotting a large mole may alert salon professional to the presence of an early melanoma.

E. Evolution. Benign moles tend to look the same over time. If a mole starts to evolve or change in size, shape, symptoms, color, or elevation, this may be an early sign of melanoma. Estheticians who see clients on a regular basis are in an excellent position to notice a changing mole that may be an early melanoma.

Far more people visit their estheticians, hair stylists, and other salon professionals on a regular basis than their dermatologist. Salon professionals see their clients every few months and build a trusting relationship over time. This puts them in a unique position to save their client’s life by spotting any unusual spots on their skin that may be early skin cancers and directing them to the appropriate professional for treatment. As part of their community outreach and prevention efforts, cancer programs may want to consider reaching out to salon professionals in their community with education similar to what the Melanoma Foundation of New England has done with its *Skinny on the Skin* program. Learn more at: mfne.org/prevent-melanoma/the-skinny-on-skin. 

Dr. Robin Travers is a dermatologist at SkinCare Physicians in the Boston, Mass area. She writes a monthly column in the JAMA Dermatology summarizing the most relevant and exciting recent dermatology research. Dr. Travers serves on the Medical Advisory Board of the MFNE and coaches MFNE’s Marathon Team for the Boston Marathon every year.

References

1. Bailey EE, Marghoob AA, Orenco IF, Testa MA, White VR, Geller AC. Skin cancer knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in the salon: a survey of working hair professionals in Houston, Texas. *Arch Dermatol.* 2011;147(10):1159-1165.

