

Protect your skin from the sun's rays

Letter carriers often spend hours in the sun while on our routes. We deal with the various hazards of the job, such as heat, cold, snow and ice, and aggressive dogs, but we can't forget another danger: skin cancer.

Skin cancer is the abnormal growth of genetically damaged skin cells. Most skin cancer is linked to sun exposure. The more exposure over your lifetime, the greater the risk of cancer. Frequent sunburn makes the skin damage worse, but even if you've rarely experienced sunburn, the cellular damage and the skin cancer that can come with it build up with long-term sun exposure. Every person who has spent years in the sun—even if he or she has been careful to use sunscreen and limit exposure to avoid burning—should be aware of the risk of skin cancer.

The link to sun exposure may be why skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States, affecting about 1 in 5 people by age 70. Because the risk rises with more sun exposure, skin cancer is a greater concern as we age. While most skin cancers are easily treated and not life-threatening, if they aren't detected early, some types of skin cancer can be deadly—according to the Skin Cancer Foundation, someone dies of skin cancer in this country every 30 minutes.

“We think of sunshine as healthy, but working in the sun day after day is a health hazard for a letter carrier,” NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. said. “Every carrier, at any age, should take steps to protect themselves from the sun's rays and know the signs of skin cancer to catch it early—and older carriers may want to get screened for skin cancer by a dermatologist on a regular basis.”

Types of skin cancer

There are three common types of skin cancer, each affecting a different type of cell in the skin.

Squamous cell cancer (or “carcinoma,” another word for cancerous growth) affects the outer layer of skin made up of “squamous” cells that eventually die and are shed from the body. Basal cells make up the layer below and can develop basal cell carcinoma.

Melanoma affects melanocytes, cells that produce a skin pigment called melanin, which is the body's natural sunscreen. Sun exposure causes these cells to produce additional melanin to protect skin layers below, causing a tan.

Basal cell cancer accounts for about 80 percent of skin cancers in this country, and squamous cell cancer about 20 percent. Melanoma is rare, accounting for less than 1 percent of skin cancer incidents. However, melanoma kills five times more people each year—more than 10,000 people die of melanomas annually, versus about 2,000 for the other two types.

Skin cancer strikes men more often than women, and fair-skinned people more often than those with dark skin. On the other hand, dark skin may make it harder to notice skin cancer and get early treatment, which may explain why Black Americans are less likely to survive when they contract skin cancer. Sun exposure is not the only factor—some skin cancers can appear on parts of the body rarely exposed to the sun.

Three steps to prevention

There are three steps to avoiding skin cancer.

Step One is minimizing sun exposure by wearing sunscreen and appropriate clothing whenever you

are outside in the sun, even in cold weather.

On exposed skin, use the right sunscreen. A “broad spectrum” sunscreen blocks both kinds of ultraviolet light rays (UVA and UVB) that cause the most damage to the skin. Use a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. SPF measures how much longer the skin is safe with sunscreen protection than without it—on a day when it would take half an hour for skin to burn, SPF 15 should give you nearly eight hours of safety. Be sure to use enough sunscreen for adequate coverage of the skin. Dermatologists suggest using at least 1 ounce of sunscreen—about enough to fill a shot glass—to cover exposed areas.

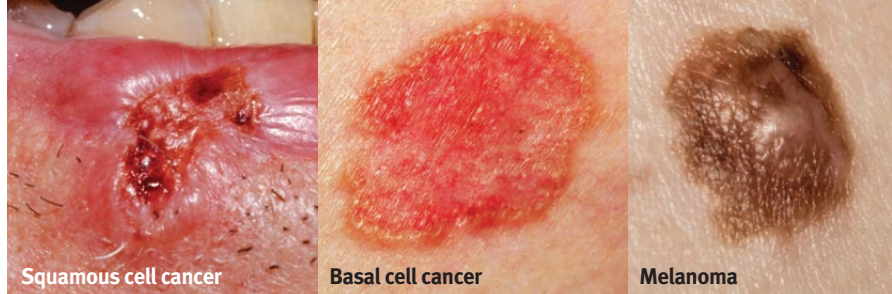
Sun conditions can change and sweat can wash away sunscreen, so bring a bottle of sunscreen with you on your route to reapply if necessary. Also, be sure your sunscreen has not expired. Check the expiration date, and if there is no date, don't use it if it is three years old or more. If you've stored the sunscreen in a hot place, such as an LLV, it may lose its effectiveness sooner.

Use sunscreen year-round, even on cloudy days. As the weather turns cooler, it may fool your skin into feeling safe, but the sun's ultraviolet radiation can still damage exposed skin.

Keep in mind that, as someone who receives large amounts of sun exposure on the job, a letter carrier needs to be careful about exposure at the beach or the park, too. Total exposure over a lifetime is the main risk factor for skin cancer.

Spot cancer early

Step Two is learning to spot the signs of skin cancer on your own skin, or with the help of a loved one.



Even if you have always been careful to protect yourself on sunny days, the risk of skin cancer increases as you grow older. Most skin cancer can be treated successfully if detected early enough, so learn the signs of skin cancer.

Melanocytes, those pigment-producing cells that can develop into melanoma, also often produce harmless, non-cancerous growths we know as moles. Pigment clustered in one area is a freckle. Neither of those is cancerous, but they can make discerning cancerous skin growths more difficult, and a mole can later develop into a melanoma, so it is important to check your skin regularly and know what to look for.

The Skin Cancer Foundation recommends that people practice monthly head-to-toe self-examination of their skin. Skin cancers found and removed early are almost always curable.

Most skin cancers are either found by people checking their own skin or are noticed by a loved one. With good lighting and a full-length mirror, check your whole body. Use a hand-held mirror or ask for help to see hard-to-reach spots. Check your whole body, not just sun-exposed areas, including underarms, scalp, groin and the soles of your feet.

Keep a keen eye out for melanoma, as it is the most dangerous and fastest-spreading skin cancer. It can become life-threatening in as little as six weeks and, if untreated, can spread to other parts of the body. Melanomas are usually flat with uneven borders and may have multiple dark colors. Use the ABCDE rule to look for melanoma:

- **A = Asymmetry.** Look for spots that are asymmetrical rather than round.

- **B = Border.** Look for spots with uneven borders.
- **C = Color.** Look for spots with an unusual or uneven color.
- **D = Diameter.** Look for spots that are larger than a quarter-inch—the width of a pencil eraser.
- **E = Evolving.** Look for any change in a mole or other spot on the skin. Any change in size, shape, color, elevation or other trait, or any new symptom such as bleeding, itching or crusting points to danger.

If you or someone in your family has had melanoma in the past, see a dermatologist, who is likely to recommend regular visits to monitor your skin, even if you are relatively young.

Basal cell carcinomas usually appear on skin areas that get the most sun, such as the face or neck, but they can show up anywhere. Look for:

- Flat, firm, pale or yellow areas, similar to a scar
- Raised reddish patches that might be itchy
- Small, pink or red, translucent, shiny, pearly bumps, which might have blue, brown or black areas
- Pink growths with raised edges and a lower area in their center, which might contain abnormal blood vessels spreading out like the spokes of a tire
- Open sores (which may have oozing or crusted areas) that don't heal, or that heal and then come back

Squamous cell carcinomas also tend to grow on areas that get sun, such as the face, ear, neck, lips or hands. But they can also show up anywhere. Look for:

- Rough or scaly red patches, which might crust or bleed
- Raised growths or lumps, sometimes with a lower area in the center
- Open sores (which may have oozing or crusted areas) that don't heal, or that heal and then come back
- Wart-like growths

See a dermatologist

Step Three is visiting a dermatologist for regular checkups and whenever you see something that concerns you.

If you or someone else notices anything unusual on your skin, including any new spots or a change in the shape, color or size of a spot, visit your doctor as soon as possible.

For more information, visit the Skin Cancer Foundation website at skincancer.org.

If you are diagnosed with skin cancer, you may qualify for workers' compensation. Skin cancer is not automatically covered; as with other injuries or illnesses, the worker must provide a doctor's medical report linking the skin cancer to exposure in the workplace. Workplace exposure does not have to be the sole cause, though—if the workplace exposure contributes "in any way" to the skin cancer, the injury can be considered compensable by the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). The Federal Employees' Compensation Act includes a schedule award for skin cancer.

If you believe that you acquired skin cancer due to your performance of duties, reach out to the OWCP representative in your branch, or to your national business agent's office, to get the necessary guidance. **PR**