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CHANNELS A MOTHER'S WORST FEAR

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seasons in the sun

A little UV exposure is inevitable. So, asks Julia Chaplin, is there any way to erase the sins of summer—however accidental they may be—before they show up?

Out in Montauk, where I spend each July and August, my friends tease that they can spot me down the beach from the birdlike silhouette of the giant straw hat that's become my summer trademark. And when I'm back in Manhattan, people seem skeptical when I tell them I'm a surfer because of how untan my fair skin appears. ("It's the strong sunblock!" I assure them.) By all accounts, I am much more responsible than practically everyone I know about protecting myself from UVA/UVB exposure, but lately I've begun to notice tiny creases on my chest, small broken capillaries around my nose, and a few brown spots on my hands. Can anyone be that cautious, short of living in the dark? Is there any way for a surfer like me—or even an urbanite ducking in and out of shops on the weekend—to really be safe from skin cancer and photaging? And is there some sort of checklist we should be ticking off after a summer outside or a midwinter jaunt to the Caribbean to stop abnormal cells and mottled skin from ever forming?
On a mission, I schedule a full-body exam with dermatologist Bruce Katz, M.D., director of the JUVA Medispa in Manhattan. As Katz searches for actinic keratoses (rough, precancerous red patches) and irregular moles, I nervously ramble about my misspent—albeit exciting—youth: sunblock-free summers on the shores of Cape Cod and winters boating in Key West and the Bahamas. Tack on the spring-break sunburns in Bermuda during the boarding school years, and then learning to surf in my mid-20s, followed by a decade maxing out my sun allotment on safari to Oahu, Baja California, and Puerto Rico, and I’m really getting scared. But, I tell Katz in earnest, now I always use eight-hour waterproof sunblocks. To which he gravely answers, “They’re lying.” No block is truly waterproof. Plus, he says, “It has to be applied every 40 minutes, and you have to use about one-fifth of the tube per day” to get the SPF level on the label.

Just because I’m in my mid-30s and don’t look like a shriveled-up, brown-spotted raisin (yet), I’m by no means home free. Katz warns. Even the best sunscreens—those with ingredients like Mexoryl SX (Lancôme, Anthelios) and stabilized avobenzone (Neutrogena, Aveeno)—don’t cover the entire spectrum of skin-ruining UV rays, and sun damage, which accounts for 80 percent of the skin’s premature aging, can take years to materialize. “If you got a lot of sun last summer, it may not show for ten years,” he says. “Or if you get a sunburn now, a batch of brown spots might show up within three months.” A mole that develops into a melanoma tomorrow could be the result of time spent outside years—even decades—ago.

Katz takes a ballpoint pen and circles a small mole (tucked in a blind spot on the lower side of my back) that looks “suspicious.” He shows it to me using a small mirror and recommends a biopsy. Then he leads me over to the Visia scan, a computerized, Burelurella-like machine that photographs my face under natural and ultraviolet light and compares the image with those of thousands of other women in the database my age with similar skin types. (Visia detects surface and subsurface photo damage, but not precancers.) I place in the seventy-third percentile, with 100 being a perfect, lived-in-a-bat-cave-your-whole-life score. “Not terrible,” says Katz, “but a lot of women your age score in the 90s.” To make matters more depressingly, he has the Visia simulate an image of my face in ten years if I opt out of treatment. I look like central casting at a Miami retirement condo. All that’s missing is my sequined one-piece.

It’s time for serious action. I schedule a biopsy and book an appointment with the man my facialist calls “the only doctor I’d let touch me with a laser”: Roy Geronemus, M.D., the highly sought-after director of the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York. Geronemus puts on his thick examination glasses and gives me a once-over. I’ll need a shot of the V-Beam Perfect laser to zap broken capillaries, a Q-Switched ruby laser to erase the slight brown spots on my face (which I didn’t even know I had), and one to three turns of the Fraxel Restore for the dreaded chest wrinkles, which will also stimulate collagen production and improve the elasticity of my poor, chronically sunned décolletage.

Still, no matter how SPF-crazed we all try to be in the future, accidental sun searings are bound to happen. Thankfully, new treatments are being developed to cater to my “morning after” crowd. Now, when you (accidentally) get a sunburn, says Neil Sadick, M.D., clinical professor of dermatology at Weill Cornell Medical College, if you can slide under a red light LED machine like the Omnirax or Gentle-Waves within 24 hours, it will decrease the skin’s inflammation and slow the development of skin cancer and photoaging. (Note to all tropically located Four Seasons: Pick up one of these machines!) Norman Leaf, M.D., of Leaf & Rusher, has imbued his line’s Tx Night Formula with DNA Resolve, a “secret weapon” enzyme that repairs UV damage incurred as recently as 24 hours ago. “The sun creates little bridges between the two strands of DNA, so when the cell goes to divide, the two daughter cells will either mutate into a cancer cell or just die prematurely, which causes premature aging,” explains Leaf. “A DNA-repair product will actually help restore the two DNA strands into normal function by breaking those bridges and reversing that trend.”

Geronemus agrees that in-clinic treatments should be augmented with at-home skin-care focused on cutting sun damage off at the pass. He particularly recommends retinoids, the antiaging forms of vitamin A, which stimulate collagen formation. Antioxidants like vitamin C and green tea extract, which combat cell-damaging free radicals, offer “some incremental value,” too.

Surfing less and staying off the beach (and being miserable) would obviously be a healthier, and prettier, long-term plan, but with an aggressive ground effort I don’t think I have to make the choice. I booked an appointment with Geronemus to zap my capillaries and chest wrinkles and have been using the Leaf & Rusher line religiously. (A huge improvement over my preinvestigation, sweet-but-useless aromatherapy products.) And I have made some compromises: Now, no matter how epic the swell, I paddle in every hour, like Katz suggested (OK, he said 40 minutes), and reapply my sunblock.