

# Staying Healthy

SUMMER 2021

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
RYAN J. DEGAN

For visitors to Mount Diablo State Park, the sight of cyclists roaming along the roads and trails on and around the mountain is a common and even expected occurrence.

Whether it's road cycling or mountain biking, Mount Diablo serves as a premier destination for bike riders both locally and throughout the Bay Area — even more so recently as residents sought outdoor refuge during the coronavirus pandemic.

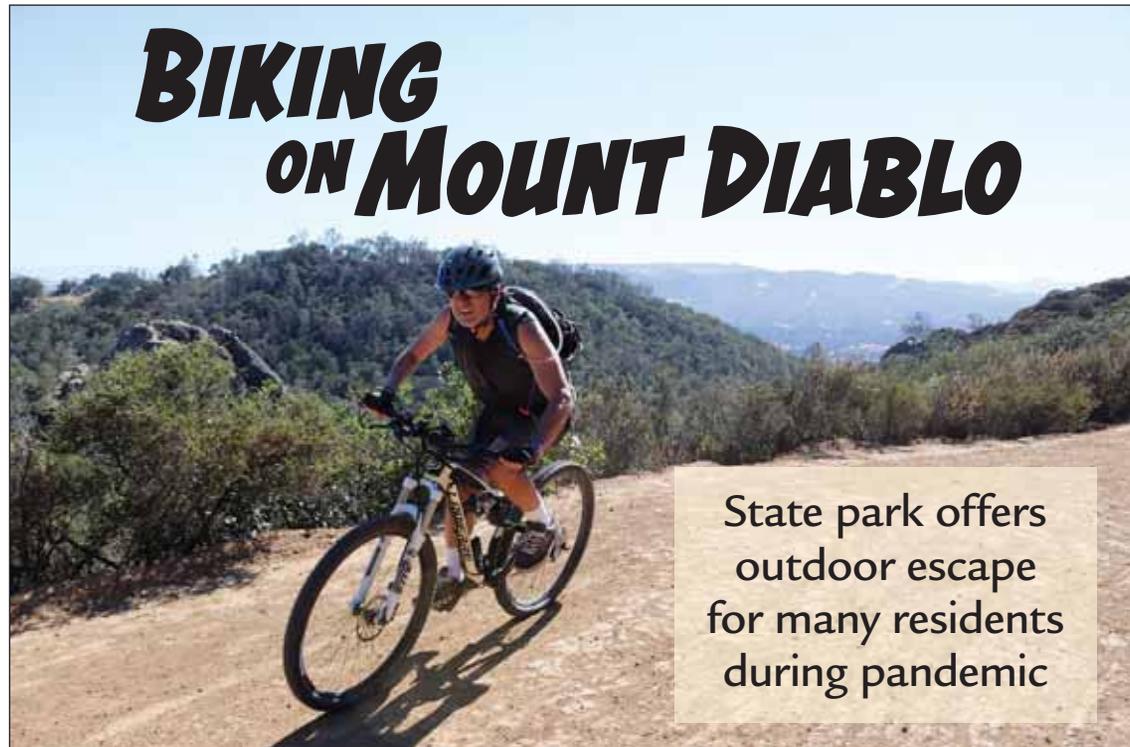
"Riding up Mount Diablo is different every time," Al Kalin, president of local bike safety advocacy group Mount Diablo Cyclists and Bike Danville, told the Weekly. "The weather, the mountain, the scenery — and on a typical early weekday, you see animals that you wouldn't even see while hiking because you're so quiet. I've virtually seen every animal except a mountain lion."

"Mount Diablo as you know is just a premier climb and a destination, and now with COVID there's even more cyclists out. It's just amazing how many people are riding bikes now, going up the mountain and throughout Danville," he added.

A colossal site familiar to anyone who lives in the East Bay, Mount Diablo has a peak of 3,849 feet within the roughly 20,000-acre Mount Diablo State Park.

Located northeast of central Danville about approximately 30 miles east of San Francisco, the mountain is populated by mixed oak woodland and open grassland and possesses a wealth of outdoor experiences for hikers, bikers, equestrian riders and outdoor enthusiasts.

Most of the mountain biking on Mount Diablo is available only on fire roads, according to local conservation group Save Mount Diablo, who encourage residents to



enjoy the area's offerings, so long as they do so responsibly.

"We respectfully request that cyclists be considerate of other outdoor user groups, and stay on legal trails to protect wildlife and native plants. Ride like a conservationist and we can keep enjoying our beautiful natural world here," Save Mount Diablo communications manager Laura Kindsvater said.

"Because of the very serious environmental issues like the climate crisis and mass species extinction event underway, we at Save Mount Diablo have been trying to respectfully reach more groups of people and invite them into our conservation tent so that we can build more momentum, and appreciation, for conservation. Nature desperately needs more types of people on the side of conservation, not less," she added.

For mountain biking in particular, Save Mount Diablo officials say that

while in the summer months trails can become dry and loose, traction is generally great throughout the year.

Save Mount Diablo staff say some of the best trails for mountain biking year-round (in order of difficulty level from easy to strenuous) include the Mitchell Canyon Fire Road, Briones to Mount Diablo Trail, Stage Road, BBQ Terrace Road, Wall Point Road and Burma Road.

Street biking is also increasingly popular for the mountain area, with road cyclists often being found on Crow Canyon/Norris Canyon Road, San Ramon Valley Boulevard, Diablo Road and Mount Diablo Scenic Boulevard/South Gate Road.

Always viewed as a popular spot for cyclists of all stripes, local cyclist groups have seen a drastic increase of interest in biking over the past year, as residents seek to take advantage of the area's natural beauty amid the coronavirus pandemic and restrictive shelter-in-place orders.

"On a typical weekend day there's probably a thousand cyclists

going up and down Mount Diablo, sharing the road with about 800 cars. Over 60% of the vehicles now on the mountain are bicycles and those are just hard facts," said Kalin, who added that in many shops there is a shortage of bikes due to increased demand.

The mountain has also been particularly popular among local students (and their parent coaches), with local youth clubs like the San Ramon Valley Mountain Bike Club finding refuge on Mount Diablo's fire roads amid the pandemic.

"There's so many kids, and especially during the pandemic, kids are all looking for something to do and biking became super popular," San Ramon Valley Mountain Bike Club team director Bruce Bilodeau said. "(At the beginning of the pandemic) we sat down with the county rules and wrote a whole protocol for our coaching staff and we implemented it and it's been working great."

Bilodeau says the convenience of having a local place like Mount

Diablo to ride has made all the difference, with the local trails helping students get out to exercise and train for competitions within the Nor-Cal High School Cycling League — which the student club is a part of.

"It would have been hard for us to do a local after-school sport when people have to drive an hour to get to practice," he said.

The convenience of Mount Diablo is "really nice," according to Bilodeau. "In fact I think that has a lot to do with the popularity of the sport locally, especially among kids. What we've found, as far as high school mountain bike clubs are concerned, is that if there aren't trails that are easily available near a high school, they tend not to have a mountain bike team. So Mount Diablo has been a real treasure."

Biking events are also slowly returning to the mountain, according to Valley Spokesmen Bike Club president Mark Dedon, who said that after having to cancel its annual rides last year due to the pandemic, his group is eager to get back on the mountain.

"We have really beautiful riding in the valley; that is the reason that keeps everybody riding around here. In particular Mount Diablo has been amazing; it's one of my favorite rides," he said. "Mount Diablo is really a nice ride. It can look intimidating from the bottom, but you have a nice low gear in your bike and it's very quiet and serene. It's very beautiful, you get some amazing views and it's always fun to coast down again."

The Valley Spokesmen club — which fluctuates between 400 and 600 members annually — had its signature events, 45th Cinderella Classic and Challenge, recently celebrated using a virtual model. However, Dedon says his group is hoping to return to an in-person model for one of its flagship events, the Mount Diablo Challenge.

"It's a timed ascent up the mountain that starts at the Athenian School and it goes up Mount Diablo Scenic Boulevard up the mountain and into the park and up to the summit. It's 11.2 miles and people are timed and ride it as fast as they can, if they want to," he said.

The 38th annual Mount Diablo Challenge is currently scheduled for Oct. 3. Registration opens June 15. Residents can learn more online at [www.valleyspokesmen.org](http://www.valleyspokesmen.org).

For more information on Mount Diablo State Park, visit [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov). ■



Top: San Ramon Valley Mountain Bike Club coach Eric Bretthauer begins his ascent on a Mount Diablo trail. Above: Luka Arozqueta, William Weed Jr. and Tatum Roberts tear down a trail. Right: Coach Adrian Arozqueta rides near Sentinel Rock.



# The importance of sun safety this summer

'I never thought basal cell would be a big deal.' Pleasanton woman recounts harrowing experience with skin cancer

By JULIA BAUM

Pleasanton resident Cindy De Pretis said she “had no respect” for basal cell carcinoma — the most commonly diagnosed form of skin cancer in the United States — until a normally minor surgery to remove a cancerous spot on her face more than six years ago unexpectedly morphed into something much more.

She first noticed some blood on the side of her nose “where you’d have a little piercing” while applying makeup on her face in April 2011, but didn’t do anything about it until November 2014.

“That’s a very embarrassing thing; I pretended this was not a thing,” De Pretis told the Weekly. “It would close up and I would think it was healing. It was a long period of time.”

Coming from a family with “a lot of basal and squamous cells,” De Pretis said she had “been around it and didn’t think much about it.”

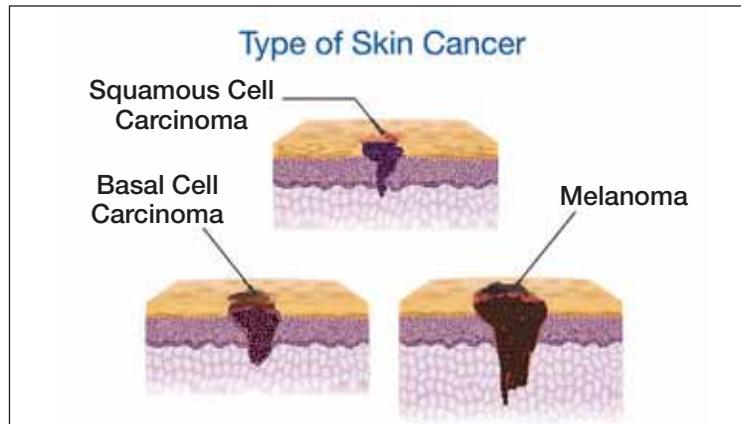
“I had always heard of moles, you’re always taught to look out for

moles,” she said. “No one told me to look out for a little hole. I thought, ‘Gosh I’ve damaged a pore or something like that.’ Nearly four years later, it was getting bigger to where I had no more opportunity to ignore it.”

A dermatologist’s visit confirmed De Pretis had basal cell carcinoma and she was scheduled for Mohs surgery, which involves removing cancerous tissue from the affected site. When she went in for the procedure, De Pretis’ doctor told her that “they do about 500 of these a year, but this one surprised me.”

Before she left the office, De Pretis was sent to a surgeon but hadn’t seen the extent of her surgery yet. “He said, have you seen this, and I’m like, no. He hands me a mirror, and I was in for the shock of my life.”

“They ended up removing about half of my nose and a portion of my cheek,” De Pretis said. “They said it really kills you and rarely metastasizes but it does eat up and damage.



GETTY IMAGES

It would have continued eating my skin, the hole would have continued” without surgery.

De Pretis ended up spending nearly two years undergoing additional surgeries, including a forehead flap, followed by many laser treatments.

“It was a really gruesome, gruesome process,” she said “I literally couldn’t see my grandson. I would have terrified him, he was 1-1/2 to 2

years old. Even today, I wouldn’t let him see it. It was bad, I wouldn’t go out in public.”

For the rest of her life, De Pretis will have facial scars and severed nerves; “it’s just the way it is now,” she said. “I never thought basal cell would be a big deal. I didn’t understand the devastating effects.”

According to Dr. Meghan Dickman, a dermatologist at Stanford

Health Care-ValleyCare, basal cell carcinoma rarely spreads to other areas or metastasizes but can have significant consequences, if left untreated.

Most often presented as a small non-healing wound, basal cell carcinoma doesn’t come from moles, according to Dickman. “They often can go under the radar. It’s not that classic photo you see of a black, growing lesion,” Dickman said. “They can sometimes be so subtle, just a shiny pink bump — it can really be quite subtle.”

It’s been “a very common scenario” where a patient would see Dickman for what they had mistaken as a pimple on their face but was actually basal carcinoma.

“It often is just a small pink bump,” Dickman said. “I always tell patients, if you notice a non-healing wound, that’s a reason to see a dermatologist. Because that’s a very common

See **SUN SAFETY** on Page 15

## Vax for cash

Newsom offers big bucks for Californians who get their shots

By BEN CHRISTOPHER/CALMATTERS

For Californians who are insufficiently compelled by civic duty and self-preservation to get vaccinated, Gov. Gavin Newsom is offering another reason to get the jab: cold, hard cash.

Last week, Newsom announced a \$116.5 million “Vax for the Win” program the largest inoculation lottery program in the country. The money will be split among dozens of lucky Californians: \$1.5 million to each of 10 “grand cash prize” winners who will be picked by random draw on June 15, and \$50,000 each to 30 “Fridays for 30” winners to be selected by random draw today and June 11.

The remaining \$100 million will be divided up in \$50 retail gift cards among the next 2 million Californians to complete their vaccine regime.

“These are real incentives,” the governor said at a press conference May 27. “And these are an opportunity to say thank you to those not only seeking to get vaccinated, as we move forward, but also those that have been vaccinated.”

According to the most recent state vaccine data, a little more than half of all Californians over age 12 have been fully vaccinated. Another 13% have received one of two shots.

That still leaves more than 12 million Californians unvaccinated.

The percentage vaccinated varies wildly by race and income. Among Californians living in the top quarter of the healthiest ZIP codes, 76.6%

have received at least one dose. In the least healthy quarter in the state’s “Healthy Places” Index, the share is only 52.1%.

“Some Californians weren’t ready to get their COVID-19 vaccine on day one, and that’s OK. This program is designed to encourage those who need extra support to get vaccinated and help keep California safe,” Dr. Tomás Aragón, director of the California Department of Public Health, said in a statement.

H.D. Palmer, a spokesperson for the state Department of Finance, said the lottery funding will initially come out of the state’s emergency operations account, but will be repaid with the state’s multi-billion dollar allotment of federal relief funds.

“The cost of not getting vaccinated is exponentially, incalculably higher,” Newsom said.

The governor noted that Californians who have already been inoculated will be entered into both the \$1.5 million and \$50,000 contests. When the state rolled out its MyTurn website as a one-stop-shop for vaccine appointments, most Californians turned elsewhere. But the state also maintains a confidential registry of all vaccine recipients. The names of winners will be kept confidential unless they volunteer to have them released, said Newsom.

Republican Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio was the first to launch a statewide cash-for-vax lottery program in mid-May. Nearly 3 million Ohioans entered and a 22-year-old recent college grad was the first winner on

May 26. According to one analysis, vaccinations jumped by 40% in the week after DeWine’s announcement.

Since then other state governors have followed suit. But California’s cash giveaway is the biggest yet.

For Newsom, the program represents a political win-win. The governor has vowed to ease most of California’s COVID restrictions by June 15. The more vaccinated Californians, the more likely it is that the reopening process will go off without another surge in cases and hospitalizations. That, in turn, would be good news for the state, but also a governor who is hoping to survive an all-but-certain recall election later this year.

In a Public Policy Institute of California poll released last week, 57% of likely voters said they oppose removing Newsom, while 40% said they supported the recall. In the survey, 61% approved Newsom’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic and 75% gave the state excellent or good marks for vaccine distribution.

Earlier in the month, the governor went on a statewide tour announcing various goodies from his latest revenue-rich budget proposal — a convenient mix of policy-making and politics. Handing out even more cash to Californians in the name of public health can’t hurt the governor’s political image either.

Republican John Cox quickly accused Newsom of trying to “buy votes before the recall.”

Based on the nearly 20 million Californians who have received at



ANNE WERNIKOFF/CALMATTERS

Medical assistant Letrice Smith fills syringes during a community COVID-19 vaccination clinic run by Ravenswood Family Health Network at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park on April 10.

least one dose now, the odds of winning the \$1.5 million prize are 1 in 2 million— 100 times better than the chances of winning the Powerball or Mega Millions jackpots, but for far less money.

Newsom said the administration consulted with researchers at UCLA’s COVID-19 Health and Politics project in putting the program together.

According to research conducted by political scientist Lynn Vavreck, lead researcher at the project, about a third of survey respondents said they were “more likely” to get a COVID vaccine if offered a cash prize of \$50 to \$100. That’s compared to other tactics, including pro-vaccine public messaging from celebrities.

Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious disease physician at the University of California San Francisco, said that different people remain unvaccinated for very different reasons — a lack of social pressure, inconvenience, concerns about common side effects and more unfounded and outlandish safety concerns — so a single policy isn’t likely to convince them all.

A possible cash incentive “will move the needle for the people on the fence,” he said. “The people who are watching and waiting, who are not necessarily opposed to the vaccine but waiting to see people they know get it ... that group will probably be most moved.”

Earlier in May, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that fully vaccinated Americans can largely dispense with mask-wearing and social distancing — providing a powerful incentive for many. Though California has been reluctant to adopt more coercive measures, such as a statewide vaccine passport requirement, the reopening rules allow fully vaccinated people to attend larger events. Also, state and local governments have imposed selective requirements on certain Californians — public university students are likely to be required to have their shots, though prison guards are not. ■

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## STAYING HEALTHY

# Book is plea for better patient care

‘Praying for Restraint’ reflects on toxic work conditions at inner-city hospital

BY DOLORES FOX CIARDELLI

If Allen Long learned one thing from working as a certified nursing assistant at an inner-city “safety net” hospital, it was to get high-quality health insurance and only to go to highly rated health care facilities.

Long has chronicled his harrowing five years caring for patients at a hospital he calls “Malmed Memorial” in his recently published book, “Praying for Restraint.”

The title has three meanings, Long explained.

“One, I wanted the hospital to restrain the violent psych patients, which it almost never did,” he said. “Two, I wished the bad management and staff had restrained themselves from being so abusive. Three, still carrying the remnants of PTSD, I had to restrain myself from striking patients who hit me.”

Long, 64, lives in Pleasanton with his wife Elizabeth, and he tells the effect of the job on their marriage as he ranted about his frustrations each night. Finally he realized he should vent to his therapist, who was already helping him deal with his PTSD after a childhood of beatings by his father. All this is covered in Long’s first memoir, “Less Than Human.”

“If you have something really hard to bear and you’re in pain, I think it’s fine to let your spouse know what’s going on,” Long concluded. “But if you need to hammer on and get it off your chest, you need a therapist.”

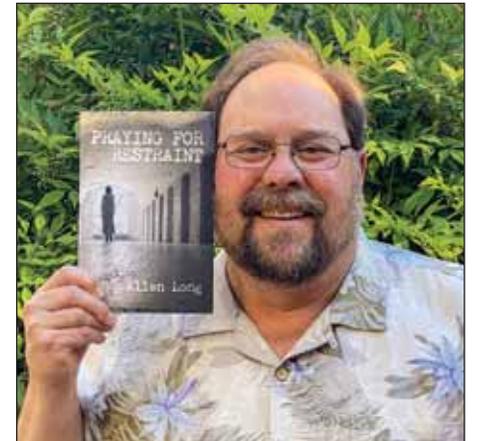
In “Praying for Restraint,” Long relates incident after incident of dealing for hours with suffering, erratic patients, while co-workers were often uncooperative and administration only cared about the bottom line. Plus, the hospital was understaffed and lacked equipment.

He was surprised to see his hospital given three stars in a rating.

“It’s scary that an ‘average’ hospital can be so awful,” Long said.

He also tells heartwarming tales about patients he likes, and he does not hesitate to point out his own mistakes.

“If you spend your time on the defensive trying to make yourself look perfect, the book will lack authenticity,” he said.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Pleasanton author Allen Long with his new book, “Praying for Restraint.”

Long has a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from the University of Arizona. After years in the corporate world, he realized he would be happier in a “helping” profession so trained to be a certified nursing assistant and landed the job at the inner-city hospital.

Horrified by the toxic work environment, he started to journal his experiences.

“I was collecting rich material almost daily,” he recalled.

Long eventually realized that he had a book, organized the materials, and changed the writing to the past tense.

“I viewed that job as putting my body, soul and marriage at risk and thought I should show those dimensions,” he said. “Luckily I came through it one piece.”

Allen hopes the book will be read by those in the medical field who might be able to improve the situation. He also suggests it for anyone considering a career in health care, who cares about hospital administration and health care reform, and those interested in reading about the lingering effects of PTSD.

“I would love to see this book used in entry level classes in nursing and hospital administration,” he said. “That’s where a lot of the change could come from.”

Published by Legacy Book Press, “Praying for Restraint” is available at retailers including Towne Center Books and Amazon. ■



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# Health officials encourage residents to 'BEFAST' during Stroke Awareness Month

Prevention and early detection are vital

BY RYAN J. DEGAN

When it comes to treating a stroke, the importance of timing cannot be understated.

Recognizing the signs and receiving care as soon as possible can often mean the difference between a patient recovering or not, according to local health officials, who are working to get the word out about the importance of prompt care as this week marked the end of National Stroke Awareness Month.

"Early stroke diagnosis is important for a couple of reasons. The treatments that we have for stroke are all more effective the sooner they are given after the onset of the symptoms. As well, there are 'time windows' beyond which treatments cannot be used at all," Dr. Joe Toscano, emergency department medical director at San Ramon Regional Medical Center, told the Weekly.

"Finally, patients can develop complications from a stroke, so seeking care as early as possible permits medical personnel to evaluate and observe for those complications as well as do things to prevent or treat them," Toscano added.

According to the American Heart Association, a stroke occurs when a clot or rupture interrupts blood flow to the brain, depriving it of oxygen-rich blood and killing brain



cells. The longer a brain goes without oxygen-rich blood, the more cells die and the more damage is done; this is why identification and treatment is so vitally important.

To help people identify and react to someone who may be having a stroke, the American Heart Association has developed the "BEFAST" system to recognize the symptoms of a stroke:

**B: Balance** - Is there a loss of balance, coordination or trouble walking?

**E: Eyes** - Is it difficult to see in one or both eyes?

**F: Face** - When the person smiles, does one side of the face droop?

**A: Arms** - Does one arm drift down when the person raises both arms?

**S: Speech** - Is speech strange or slurred?

**T: Time** - Don't wait to call 911 if you see any of the above signs.

Other common symptoms also include numbness or weakness (especially on one

side of the body), confusion in speech and the patient suffering an extreme headache.

Despite stroke being the fifth leading cause of death in the United States and about one in four stroke survivors is at risk for another, officials from the American Heart Association say that up to 80% of second clot-related strokes can be preventable through, among other things, managing blood pressure.

"Checking your blood pressure regularly will help let you know if you have it under control. It will also help you understand which factors are putting you at higher risk for stroke and heart attack," American Heart Association officials said as a part of their Stroke Awareness Month campaign.

"If you have high blood pressure, you should talk to your doctor to figure out how frequently you should be checking at home," they said.

Officials added that for most people checking their blood pressure twice in the morning and twice in the evening for a week will help their doctors better understand their blood pressure; however, it is important that each patient consult with their physician.

To help achieve ideal health, the American Heart Association also encourages people to

refrain from smoking, maintain physical activity, control cholesterol, reduce blood sugar and maintain a healthy body weight.

For Tri-Valley residents, San Ramon Regional Medical Center in San Ramon and Stanford Health Care-ValleyCare in Pleasanton have both been certified as primary stroke centers by The Joint Commission, an organization that accredits thousands of health care organizations and programs throughout the United States.

San Ramon Regional has also earned The Joint Commission's Gold Seal of Approval and is a part of the Contra Costa County Stroke System, which has made the hospital's emergency department a stroke receiving center for the county.

Hospital staff say the Contra Costa County Stroke System is a coordinated 911 emergency response that connects patients to trained emergency staff who are capable of identifying strokes quickly and transporting them to designated stroke centers for care.

"Many are familiar with strokes and the devastating effects they can have on victims," hospital staff said. "Every minute counts when someone is experiencing a medical emergency such as a stroke or heart attack, and our team is able to provide those patients with immediate attention." ■

## SUN SAFETY

Continued from Page 12

presentation for basal cell, but other skin cancers can do the same."

The biggest risk factor for basal cell carcinoma is a history of blistering sunburns. "It is high-intensity, intermittent sun exposure, except in rare situations like genetically inherited syndromes," Dickman said.

"Squamous cell (carcinoma), in contrast, the biggest risk factor is chronic everyday exposure," Dickman added. People in outdoor professions including police officers, agricultural workers and construction laborers have greater odds of developing squamous cell carcinoma.

Squamous cell has a higher risk than basal cell carcinoma because of the possibility that it could spread to other areas such as lymph nodes. "Squamous cells typically are more of a crusted pink bump," Dickman said. "Sometimes people will think it looks a bit like a wart. It can be rough and almost like sandpaper."

Any kind of skin cancer is worrisome but Dickman said, "Melanoma is definitely the skin cancer we worry about the most because it can be lethal."

When caught early, however, melanoma is "extremely treatable." Sun exposure increases the risk of melanoma, but having a family member with it can increase one's risk as well.

"Melanoma is tricky because it doesn't always happen in sun-exposed areas," Dickman said. "I've seen it on patients' feet, genitals, inside the mouth or in the eye. It's not just those areas where you think about getting a lot of sun exposure."

Melanoma will usually show up as a dark or changing lesion on the body, and can pop up in an existing mole that seems to be darkening or growing.

"Some things I find helpful for patients to

look for is something growing rapidly," Dickman added. "Anything itchy, painful or that seems to be bleeding, those can be things to look for."

For the best sun protection, Dickman recommends applying sunblock daily, and tells patients that "it should meet two criteria — broad-spectrum and SPF 30 or higher."

"The price, brand and ingredients are less important, but if you are concerned about environmental effects of sunscreen or absorption into the bloodstream, then zinc oxide or titanium dioxide are good," Dickman said.

However, because "in the best of situations, sunscreen only lasts two hours," Dickman said people should be sure to reapply it regularly. Wearing photo-protective clothing while outdoors is also a good idea, and is now widely available.

Though people with fair skin are more likely to get sunburned, Dickman said everyone should take the same precautions: "You may be less likely to sunburn, the more pigment you have, but I certainly see skin cancer in all types of people."

"(Skin cancer) tends to be caught later because it might not be on the top of their radar but it does happen," Dickman said. "All people should employ self-protecting measures, no matter what their skin type."

Dickman also recommended annual skin checks for anyone over the age of 50, and anyone with a history of skin cancer.

After learning these lessons the hard way, De Pretis said she has taken them to heart: "I stay out of the sun, I've got my special sunscreen on, and since then I've had quite a few basal cells but I get skin checks every six months."

"Anything that looks suspicious, it's better to go get it checked out right away," De Pretis said. "I probably could have saved myself a forehead flap if I had just gone in 2011." ■

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