Preventing Skin Cancer

Findings of the Task Force on Community Preventive Services on Reducing Exposure to Ultraviolet Light

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SUMMARY

Rates of skin cancer, the most common cancer in the United States, are increasing. The most preventable risk factor for skin cancer is unprotected ultraviolet (UV) exposure. Seeking to identify effective approaches to reducing the incidence of skin cancer by improving individual and community efforts to reduce unprotected UV exposure, the Task Force on Community Preventive Services conducted systematic reviews of community interventions to reduce exposure to ultraviolet light and increase protective behaviors. The Task Force found sufficient evidence to recommend two interventions that are based on improvements in sun protective or “covering-up” behavior (wearing protective clothing including long-sleeved clothing or hats): educational and policy approaches in two settings—primary schools and recreational or tourism sites. They found insufficient evidence to determine the effectiveness of a range of other population-based interventions and recommended additional research in these areas: educational and policy approaches in child care centers, secondary schools and colleges, recreational or tourism sites for children, and workplaces; interventions conducted in health-care settings and targeted to both providers and children’s parents or caregivers; media campaigns alone; and communitywide multicomponent interventions.

Counseling to Prevent Skin Cancer

Recommendations and Rationale of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force

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SUMMARY

. . . The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) finds insufficient evidence to recommend for or against routine counseling by primary care clinicians to prevent skin cancer. Although counseling parents may increase children’s use of sunscreen, the USPSTF found little evidence to determine the effects of counseling on the sun protection behaviors of adults. These behaviors include wearing protective clothing, reducing excessive sun exposure, avoiding sun lamps and tanning beds, or practicing skin self-examination.

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CLINICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Using sunscreen has been shown to prevent squamous cell skin cancer. The evidence for the effect of sunscreen use in preventing melanoma, however, is mixed. Sunscreens that block both ultraviolet A (UV-A) and ultraviolet B (UV-B) light may be more effective in preventing squamous cell cancer and its precursors than those that block only UV-B light. However, people who use sunscreen alone could increase their risk for melanoma if they increase the time they spend in the sun.
- UV exposure increases the risk for skin cancer among people with all skin types, but especially fair-skinned people. Those who