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# Skin scare: 'I didn't think it would happen to me'

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Nate Schwegman wanted to look good without a shirt.

So after sweaty workouts at the gym, he sizzled in the tanning bed. His fair, freckled skin would burn and then eventually bronze.

"I might as well look good when I'm young," Schwegman, 23, remembers thinking. "I don't care if I wrinkle when I'm old."

Even after his grandmother died of melanoma, he continued to tan. And he didn't stop after

noticing a strange black mark on his back.

The spot eventually bled and Schwegman, who lives in Irvine, discovered he had advanced melanoma. The deadliest form of skin cancer is now the second most common cancer among young people 15 to 29.

"I didn't think it was ever going to happen to me."

Exposure to ultraviolet rays from the sun or from tanning beds greatly increases the risk of melanoma. Teens and young adults are also the most frequent users of tanning beds. This year, public health researchers at San Diego State University found that in many large cities, including San Diego, there are more tanning salons than either Starbucks and McDonald's.

The World Health Organization recommends a ban on tanning beds for anyone under 18. In California, teens under 14 can't tan, but older teens can with parental permission.

When Schwegman went to college in Texas, and no longer lived near the beach, he started tanning regularly. A friend managed a tanning salon in Dallas, and he could tan there a couple times a week for free.

His skin would burn at first. He peeled a couple times, but his burns turned into tans.

One day in the bathroom mirror, he noticed a black mark on his back, a little bit smaller than a dime.

"It almost looked like a scab," he said.

When it never healed, he assumed it was a mole.

Eventually he showed his parents last year, who told him to see a doctor.

"I said to him, 'You need to get that off,'" said his stepmother, Mary Schwegman. "I gave him the name and number of the dermatologist. This is where I'm kicking myself for not realizing he's a 22-year-old guy and he's never going to go to the doctor."

Months later, last November, she asked Schwegman if he'd had the mole removed. He said no but that his back was starting to hurt.

"Then he lifted up his shirt and it was bleeding," Mary Schwegman said.

The next morning she called her dermatologist and took him to the appointment herself.

A biopsy revealed that Schwegman had melanoma.

"I flipped out, I got teary eyed a little bit," he said.

In January, he underwent a 3 1/2-hour surgery to remove more back tissue and three lymph nodes that would be tested for cancer cells. Then he got another call to come in with his parents. The melanoma had spread to one node.

"I was scared, but I really was at peace about it," Schwegman said. "It was serious. It shocked me. I was crying. But it wasn't, 'Oh God, my life is over.'"

In February, he started 20 interferon treatments, a biological therapy that boosts the immune system to fight the cancer. He experienced brutal cold sweats and migraine headaches. He continued to work at his sales job, where he had health insurance to cover most of his medical bills.

He's had more scares since. Doctors removed another melanoma on his abdomen and two other non-cancerous moles. He will have to be vigilant in getting his skin checked every few months for the rest of his life. His parents even gave him sunscreen for his birthday.

"In the past, it's always been thought of as a type of cancer that affects an older population," said Dr. Jonathan Baron, one of Schwegman's dermatologists. "One of the biggest issues is making people aware that it can occur in any age group. If you catch it early, the prognosis is actually quite good."

Mary Schwegman said she advises parents to have their teens' moles checked before they leave for college.

"Mothers, especially of boys, get them in to the dermatologist before they turn 18 and leave your house, because they will never get anything taken care of until they get married and have a wife who will bug them," she said.

This summer, when Schwegman takes his shirt off by the pool at his apartment complex or at the beach, he smears sunscreen on his chest, across the two-inch scar on his stomach and over the six-inch scar across his back.

"I'm 23 years old, still fairly young," he said. "You have a long way to go. I want to grow old. The fact that I could have died at 23 is not me living life young."

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