

Cancer Association: Melanoma deaths down for both men, women in Israel

Studies in US show that use of anti-erectile dysfunction drugs can increase risk of skin cancer • Research in Sweden, Italy points to links with daily intake of alcohol

• By JUDY SIEGEL

While around the world there is an increase in cases of melanoma – the most dangerous skin tumor that can result from UV exposure – in Israel death rates from the disease have declined by 30 percent among men and by 20% in women, the Israel Cancer Association reported on Sunday.

Survival rates from the malignant tumor are increasing because of early diagnosis, it added.

The findings were disclosed at an ICA briefing on its efforts to reduce skin cancer cases and deaths.

Meanwhile, studies carried out in US universities that looked into the possibility that men taking drugs to combat erectile dysfunction with an enzyme inhibitor called PDE5a were at higher risk of melanoma were published last month in the online edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association. They found that drugs that contain this substance are liable to raise the risk of the spread of melanoma because they increase the production of the pigment melanin.



MICHAL LOTEM
(Hadassah-med.com)

Looking at the men over a period of 10 years, the study found a higher rate – as much as 2.24 times higher – of melanoma among those who took the anti-erectile dysfunction drugs recently. Taking the drugs did not raise the risk of getting non-melanoma forms

of skin cancer, the researchers found.

Melanoma was also linked to daily drinking of alcohol in Italian and Swedish epidemiological studies.

A total of 1,469 people were diagnosed with invasive and in situ melanoma in Israel in 2011 – the last year for which statistics were available – with 188 deaths, numbering almost an equal number of men and women.

An international comparison of 20 developed countries last year showed that Israel was in thirteenth place in the per-capita rate of melanoma incidences among men and 20th for women. The highest rates were reported in Australia and New Zealand, apparently because of the holes in the protective ozone layer in the area.

The per-capita rate of Israeli men dying from melanoma was eight out of 20 and 10 out of 20 for women.

The number of melanoma deaths among Israeli Arabs, who generally wear more covered clothing, remained very low in comparison to Israeli Jews.

Younger Israelis are paying more

attention to ICA public service advertisements and campaigns on avoiding sun exposure and about the accumulated risk of sunburn. Many teenagers recall being exposed to lectures on skin cancer at schools and through other media. More youth than ever put on hats and sunscreens when out in the sun. They have also learned about the dangers of tanning salons, which are barred to minors.

The ICA recently published a cartoon booklet about the sun's dangers for children in first to fourth grades, called "Smart in the Sun." Early awareness is important because danger to the DNA accumulates in the skin as exposure to UV builds up.

Prof. Michal Lotem, director of melanoma and immunotherapy at the Sharet Institute of Oncology at Hadassah University Medical Center, in Jerusalem's Ein Kerem, reported about an experimental preventive vaccine for patients who have already contracted melanoma and are at high risk for a repeated malignancy. Such patients have a 50% risk of getting the cancer again.

Genetically engineered melanoma cells are injected in patients in a move that has been found to cause the body's immune system to fight the cells better. So far, said Lotem, 16 patients have received the vaccine, which showed a powerful reaction against the tumor cells.

Prof. Ya'acov Schechter, director of the melanoma clinic at Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, disclosed that work on an experimental drug called anti PD-1 is being completed following clinical trials and is awaiting approval from the US Food and Drug Administration. The drug has few side effects and has been shown to be most effective in treating patients by using immunological means to fight the tumor. Other oncological research has involved improved treatment based on identifying specific mutations in each patient.

The Super-Pharm pharmacy chain has agreed to donate one shekel from each Life sunscreen product that it sells to the ICA. It will also sell Life mineral water with a special logo, with the proceeds also going to the association's fight against skin cancer.

The ICA has initiated a project with barbers and hairdressers to look for suspicious signs of skin cancer on the scalps and necks of their customers. They will be trained in July by plastic surgeon Prof. Shalom Avshalom.

From Monday through to June 1, hundreds of health-fund clinics and other locations are set to offer free skin tests. To make an appointment, contact your health fund, see the ICA website at www.cancer.org.il or call 1-800-599995.



THE ICA'S 'Smart in the Sun' booklet. (Israel Cancer Association)