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Jordan D. Metzler, MD

Cover up

Slap on the sunscreen this summer

An interesting thought struck me while I was speaking to a group of triathletes recently. Yes, they are fit; yes, they are intense; and yes, they are amazingly motivated people. But gosh, the ones who have been doing this for a while look a bit weather-beaten.

I began taking an informal survey in my office. "How do you take care of your skin?" I asked. Much to my surprise, many of my patients did little more than apply sunscreen at the start of their workout or race.

It is estimated that one in 50 Caucasians will develop a form of skin cancer, and skin-cancer rates among people with darker skin are increasing as well. This is a substantial increase, and much of the rise has occurred over the past 15 years. According to Dr. Barney Kennet, a dermatologist based in New York, "The number of people coming into my office with sun-damaged skin and sun-

related cancers has grown tremendously in the past 10 years."

Who is at greatest risk? Individual genetics play a role, and skin pigmentation and family history are also important. But even more significant is a history of deep sunburn. Repeated, deep, painful sun damage has been strongly linked to pre-cancerous skin lesions.

Not surprisingly, then, a key to prevention is avoiding these repeated burns. As Dr. Amy Knopper, a dermatologist from Kansas City, told me, "You can't pick your skin pigment, but you can sure pick what you do with what you've got."

OK, that sounds good, but let's get real. Triathlons, especially longer-distance events, take place during the middle of the day. Personally, I can recall the sun beating down on my back in Kona and thinking to myself, "I'm sorry, skin, I'm sorry." Much to my dismay, by the way, there is a residual burn on my back from that day, despite my regular sunblock administration.

TAKING THE THREAT SERIOUSLY

The hydration message has been received and processed by triathletes, as have similar messages advocating the benefits of stretching and strength training. But is the sunburn-prevention message resonating? Unfortunately, I'd say, not yet. If you are involved in triathlon, you must protect your skin. This means regular administration of waterproof sunblock. The SPF (sun protection factor) indicates the relative time it will take for you to burn your skin while wearing that particular sunblock. For example, if you might burn in 10 minutes nor-

mally, then an SPF of 15 enables you stay in the sun for 150 minutes without burning. Of course, these numbers have different implications for every athlete, so remaining vigilant is vitally important. I try to find a product that stays on when wet and offers at least SPF 30.

In addition, when coming out of the swim, take the time to apply more sunblock, even if it means a bit of extra time in transition. And without fail, when you are training, load up on skin protection. Slop it on, all over yourself, and make sure to carry some for later. If you are running, use a hat or visor to prevent burns to your face and the top of your head.

And what about getting a tan? As many members of my triathlon team tell me during our long bike rides, "It's OK to fake it; we all do!" In other words, if you want to look darker, use sunless tanning products. Even though they don't offer sun protection, they offer a safer alternative for those who just can't live without the Miss Hawaiian Tropic look.

And lastly, if there are any new or funny-looking moles or patches on your skin, speak to your primary doctor or dermatologist. All types of skin cancer are treated more easily when they are caught early.

As we spend hours making ourselves faster, fitter and healthier, let's be sure to remember that our skin needs attention, too. ▲

Jordan D. Metzler, MD, is a nationally recognized sports-medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York. In addition, Dr. Metzler is a 25-time marathon runner and four-time Ironman finisher. For more about triathlon and sun protection, visit www.tbsmartfoundation.ca.