



# Occupational Hazard

Check and protect your skin from the sun.

by *Barb Baylor Anderson*, field editor

When David Gazda served as president of the Georgia Cattlemen's Association last year, he didn't just talk about beef production. The American Angus Association regional manager wrapped up his talks with something more personal. He currently is in treatment for melanoma and is keen about raising awareness of skin cancer by sharing his experience.

Gazda is not alone. According to the American Cancer Society, skin cancer is the most common cancer today, and the number of cases continues to climb. More than 3.5 million skin cancers are diagnosed each year in the United States alone — more than all other cancers combined.

Farmers and ranchers may be more



PHOTO BY KATIE GAZDA

vulnerable to skin cancers just by virtue of spending so much time outdoors. While the American Cancer Society does not offer industry-specific guidance, Deputy Chief

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Medical Officer Len Lichtenfeld says the nature of the occupation and childhood exposure to the sun make farmers and ranchers particularly susceptible.

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## Watch for these main skin cancers

The two main types of skin cancers are melanomas, as in Regional Manager David Gazda's case, and keratinocyte cancers, also known as basal and squamous cell skin cancers.

Basal and squamous cell skin cancers are most common. They are often found in areas that get exposed to a lot of sun, such as the head, neck and arms, but they can occur anywhere.

Basal cell carcinomas often look like flat, firm, pale areas or small, raised, pink or red, translucent, shiny, pearly bumps that may bleed after minor injury. They may have one or more abnormal blood vessels; a lower area in the center; and blue, brown or black areas.

Squamous cell carcinomas may look like growing lumps, often with a rough, scaly or crusted surface. They may also look like flat reddish patches in the skin that grow slowly.

The American Cancer Society also encourages people to recognize actinic keratosis, a skin condition that is sometimes a precursor to cancer. Actinic keratoses are usually small rough or scaly spots that may be pink-red or flesh-colored. They typically start on the face, ears or backs of the hands and arms, but can occur on other sun-exposed areas. Some of these spots can grow into squamous cell cancers, while others may stay the same or even go away on their own.

“A tan is not protective of your skin, it is damage to your skin. Repeated exposure to the sun increases your cancer risk over time,” says Lichtenfeld, who directs the Society’s Cancer Control Science Department — a group of internationally recognized experts who focus on cancer prevention and early detection, emerging science and trends in cancer. “We currently are seeing the greatest increase in melanoma cases among older, white males who are paying the price for not knowing the risk factors for skin cancer and for not using sunscreen earlier in life.”

**Watch your spots**

Perhaps the good news is you can be proactive now in protecting yourself and your children and monitoring for potential skin cancers by keeping close tabs on your skin.

“Sunburn in young people is one of the strongest predictors for adult melanoma. It is doubly important for children in the sun to have protection. Parents should set good examples,” he says.

Most skin cancers can be found early with skin exams — both by your doctor and checking your own skin frequently for any changes. If you do discover something

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suspicious, Gazda encourages farmers and ranchers to seek professional input as soon as possible.

He was diagnosed with Stage IIIC melanoma in October 2011. He had found a marble-sized lump on his back in June

2011 and saw his local physician’s assistant. He was told it was probably a cyst. Gazda saw his dermatologist that October. He routinely saw a dermatologist, since he had had spots previously removed from his back that were benign.

This time, there again was speculation the lump was a cyst, but once it was taken out and pathology confirmed cancer, Gazda had immediate surgery to remove the tumor and some lymph nodes.

“If you have any spots or changes in moles, get them checked right away. Don’t wait to make an appointment,” he says. “Not all doctors are the same or may have the same diagnosis, either. You are better off getting a second opinion as soon as you can for peace of mind or treatment.”

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**Melanoma warning signs**

You can check your skin for potential melanomas using these ABCDE criteria:

- ▶ **Asymmetry:** One-half of a mole or birthmark does not match the other.
- ▶ **Border:** The edges are irregular, ragged, notched or blurred.
- ▶ **Color:** The color is not the same all over and may include shades of brown or black, or sometimes with patches of pink, red, white or blue.
- ▶ **Diameter:** The spot is larger than one-quarter inch, although melanomas can be smaller.
- ▶ **Evolving:** The mole is changing in size, shape or color.

Other warning signs include:

- ▶ A sore that does not heal.
- ▶ Spread of pigment from the border of a spot to surrounding skin.
- ▶ Redness or a new swelling beyond the border.
- ▶ Change in sensation — itchiness, tenderness or pain.
- ▶ Change in mole surface — scaliness, oozing, bleeding or appearance of a bump or nodule.

Lichtenfeld notes, “The sooner you can get a new or different lesion or pimple checked out, the better. Melanoma is serious, but other skin cancers can be serious, too.”

**Take action**

Melanomas develop from melanocytes, cells that make the pigment that gives skin its color and also form benign moles. Changes in color, size or shape are signs melanoma may be developing.

In Gazda’s case, he did not have a changing mole. His cancer was growing inward, which may account for the early misdiagnosis. After removal of the tumor, he sought a second opinion from a melanoma specialist in Atlanta, which proved unsuccessful. He then had an acquaintance



▶ Melanoma has been tough on David Gazda’s family and colleagues, he says. Gazda appreciates all of the support given to him. He is pictured with daughters Katie and Taylor and wife Carolyn.

PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

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**Fig. 1: Examples of skin cancer**



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encourage him to contact MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

“The doctors at MD Anderson reviewed my medical files, and began trying to treat my melanoma with interferon shots. My body did not respond well to that treatment, so now I go to Houston every three months for bloodwork and scans. I had one spot removed from under my arm two years ago and another from my back last year and more lymph nodes,” he says. “I have been through radiation on my back, and had a good checkup in March 2014.”

The American Cancer Society reports most skin cancers are caused by too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays. Most of this exposure comes from the sun.

“The No. 1 sun protection rule is to stay

out of the sun. Farmers and ranchers don’t always have that option. Plan B is to wear a wide-brimmed hat. People don’t always recognize the amount of sun their scalp gets. You should also use a broad-spectrum sunscreen when outdoors, whether it is summer or winter. Snow reflects the UV rays,” Dr. Lichtenfeld says.

“I grew up in the pool, on the swim team, and worked as a lifeguard for several summers. I never wore a shirt out on the mower or the tractor,” says Gazda. “Today I still am outdoors. I run and cycle, but I do it with long sleeves, a hat and 70-plus SPF sunscreen.

“I have learned to stay out of the sun

when I can, and others should, too,” he continues. “It has been tough on my family and my work colleagues, but everyone has stepped up to take care of me and my Angus breeders and sales and my other responsibilities. Melanoma is a life-changing experience, but I feel good today and have had many prayers answered.”

Lichtenfeld says research into skin-cancer treatments continues to show promising results. “Just in the last two years, more meaningful treatment options have been developed. Therapies look more promising for treating melanomas all the time,” he says.



### **Are you more susceptible to skin cancer?**

The American Cancer Society says you need to be especially careful in the sun if you:

- ▶ have had skin cancer;
- ▶ have a family history of skin cancer, especially melanoma;
- ▶ have many moles, irregular moles or large moles;
- ▶ have freckles and burn before tanning;
- ▶ have fair skin, blue or green eyes, or blond, red or light brown hair;
- ▶ live or vacation at high altitudes (UV ray strength increases the higher up you are);
- ▶ live or vacation in tropical or subtropical climates;
- ▶ work indoors all week and then get intense sun exposure on weekends;
- ▶ spend a lot of time outdoors;
- ▶ have certain autoimmune diseases, such as lupus;
- ▶ have a medical condition that weakens your immune system;
- ▶ have had an organ transplant; or
- ▶ take medicines that lower or suppress your immune system or medicines that make your skin more sensitive to sunlight.