

Dermatologically Tested Podcast - 10. Sun Awareness with Dr Bav Shergill & Vicky Woodham

Matt Gass 00:15

We're back. You're listening to the new season of dermatologically tested, the podcast of the British Association of dermatologists aka the BAD. I'm Matt Gass. And you'll notice today that I have a new co-host, Harriet Dalwood. I just like to thank Nina and wish you good luck in her new role as Deputy CEO of the BAD and welcome Harriet to the team.

Harriet Dalwood 00:34

I'm very excited to be here. I'm really excited for season two of the podcast. As you guys might be aware, it's Sun Awareness Week. So as you'd expect, we are talking all about skin cancer and sun protection. Our guests today are Dr. Bav Shergill, chair of the skin cancer prevention committee at the BAD and Victoria Wooham, better known as Vicki, who was diagnosed with skin cancer in 2017 and is here to talk all about her experiences. Welcome both.

Dr Bav Shergill 01:01

Thanks for having us

Vicky Woodham 01:02

Thank you

Matt Gass 01:02

So it's obviously some awareness week and we're talking about all things skin cancer, particularly, I think the the big thing that we'll be getting to is the impact that the pandemic has had on skin cancer diagnoses, and melanoma in particular, but Bav, as our expert on skin cancer, perhaps you could just set the scene for us and describe the state of the UK pre pandemic, when it comes to skin cancer.

Dr Bav Shergill 01:29

Sure, I mean things weren't looking that great prior to the pandemic and lockdown, there's an increase year on year with skin cancer, increasing melanomas, we're seeing about 15,000 plus a year, there are over 200,000 cases of non-melanoma skin cancers, things like basal cell carcinoma, or squamous cell carcinoma. A, the public is aware of sun exposure and link with skin cancer, but it didn't necessarily translate into altered behaviors. Nobody thinks they sunbathe, but they may have gone out for a bike ride

for three hours in the sunshine or gone surfing or walked their dog but didn't have a hat didn't have some cream on and got burnt. So before the lockdown, we were actually struggling to cope with the amount of skin cancer coming through our dermatology departments. We were managing and we were increasing resources. So that's where we're just before, which makes all the information that we found that after the first lockdown really interesting,

Matt Gass 02:28

As we all know, people do understand the dangers of the sun, but you're right, It's the change in behaviors in the planning. and, you know, I think we've all been caught out on days where you don't necessarily give a lot of thought to it. It's all about teens and things like that. It's really challenging. I think the pandemic as well, it through a lot of that routine down the sink as well, which doesn't help. So, one of the headline statistics t last summer, last week, this year is this idea that there's 1000s of melanomas in particular which have gone missing essentially. If you look at these statistics, it looks like there's been this huge reduction in skin cancer over the last year but presumably that's painting a bit of a false picture.

Dr Bav Shergill 03:18

Totally Matt. So, what we're seeing is a massive reduction in the amount of skin cancer cases that we were expecting. This doesn't mean that because we're all in lockdown and outside of the sun for a few months that suddenly the cancers went away. What it means is those cancers aren't being seen by professionals. Actually, if you think about it, one of the commonest reasons that people come and see us is some one of their friends has noticed something on their back, or a partner, or they've been outdoors doing a sport and it's just been commented on. So those incidental pickups, or even the act of going to a GP to have a chest infection looked at and they suddenly notice something oon the back, those incidental pickups haven't happened.

Also, there's been a general fear about going outside the house because of the pandemic. That stopped people from accessing care, the English way, the British way very much so is to not make a fuss, so we didn't want to make a fuss and overburden the NHS with our concerns about our skin. So there's lots of small things that have all added up to a big drop in numbers. This worries me intensely because the quicker you pick up melanoma, the better your survival, the less need there is for chemotherapy, other surgical interventions and so on. The less of an impact the disease has on, not just you, but also all the people around you. So, in that case, this drop in numbers is very concerning. And we would certainly encourage people to check their skin and to seek help.

Vicky Woodham 04:43

I think that's really important what you say there Bav, about people being reluctant to go to the doctors. I Know one of my friends had a mole that she was a little bit concerned about. She was like, oh well, I'll leave it, I don't want to bother them right now, I'm sure it's fine. And you know it was fine. But she did phone the GP and I'm really glad she did go and got it checked out.

Harriet Dalwood 05:05

Yeah, absolutely. It's so important. So, Vicky, you've obviously been through this, it'd be great if you could tell us a little bit about your personal experience going with the GP and what you noticed.

Vicky Woodham 05:20

So I mean, the GP was amazing. Just off the bat, I got out of the shower, and I noticed that, as I scratched my back with the towel, it felt uncomfortable. And I had a mole that I hadn't really noticed beforehand. I don't know if it was completely new, or just changed that drastically. I was really unsure about it, whether I'd perhaps just caught it, or it was right in my bra line. So I wondered whether maybe it had rubbed and it was just a bit uncomfortable. So there were lots of reasons why I kind of put it off, that this was nothing and, you know, didn't need to worry about it. But when I actually looked at it and kind of thought, well hang on, It's a bit dark, it's a bit miss coloured, it's a bit misshapen, you know, all the indicators that I'm sure we'll get to at some point for what is potentially a skin cancer. So, I just thought, you know what, I'm just going to go get it looked, phoned the GP and it was a junior physician, she was very new to the practice, and she was just lovely. No problem. Had a look. Got someone in for a second opinion. Looked at it with the dermatoscope, and yes, they thought it looked a bit iffy. We're going to refer you on for a proper check.

I then just got into what is the cancer pathway, which has speedier referrals. I was seen by dermatologist who removed it under a local anesthetic and then sent it off for testing. Unfortunately, they hadn't got a wide enough area of skin around it, just to make sure that there was absolutely no way it was going to come back. So, I did have to then have a second operation, which was this time under a general anesthetic just to take out that extra tissue and made sure it's absolutely safe. They also checked a couple of lymph nodes at the same time. I've got a scar, but you know what, it's all healed really well, and I don't have cancer. You know, I still worry about it sometimes because you never know for sure whether those pesky cells got into the rest of your body. But so far, so good and hopefully, I'm lucky enough that I caught it early did something about it. And that should be the end of it.

Harriet Dalwood 08:07

I mean, yeah, thanks for sharing that, it is so important. Obviously, if you do notice something that's not quite right. Our message is definitely do go and get it checked out. Would you mind talking about your sun habits before? Did you, I feel like everyone's a little bit guilty, I mean, I know like Bav said, going out for a walk and you don't really think anything of it. But obviously damage does build on your skin and is irreversible.

Vicky Woodham 08:40

I'm quite fair skinned, so when I was little my parents were really strict with their slap it on and what have you, they were really careful, but you know, you get to be a teenager and a little bit rebellious, and your friends have got great tans and you want a great tan and it was never going to happen. But you know, I did try, and you know, it did result in sunburn on some occasions and a lot of the time you just don't notice it. I remember one day I was revising from a maths GCSE, and it was pretty overcast and not a very warm day.

And I thought, yeah, revise outside and mum said you better put some sun cream on you know, make sure and I was like, yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah, I'm just doing this and never did. Sat outside most of the day, cloud cover was pretty grey, but you know, fairly nice and fresh air and the next morning I woke up with the most incredible blisters and I have never been in so much pain in my maths exam (laughs) ever. Obviously, I left the revising to last minute. It's just things like that you just don't think, oh, no, you know, the sun's not that strong, it's not going to happen to me, it's not, and it does, you know, there's just a little bit of organization, there's no cost in taking five minutes extra to just whack a bit of cream on, and you wouldn't get on a motorbike without a helmet. So why go wandering around outside and not put sun cream on? it's just daft, and it causes cancer?

Matt Gass 10:43

You raise some really good points though, It's so challenging, particularly those teenage years and in your early 20s. Because it's very hard to persuade young people that, well, anyone really, nobody thinks they're gonna be the unlucky person that gets a skin cancer or, as we touched on it earlier, 1000s of people. But it's really important to get that message across, I think it's something that Bav and I have talked about in the past quite a lot is that how important the fashion for tans is, in terms of, you know, the risk factor it is, and it's been one of those fashions, that has really stood the test of time, you know, you go back to Coco Chanel and, those days when prior to that tans weren't as fashionable. It's really been something that we've struggled as a society, you know, particularly the UK, but in other countries as well to shake off that idea that a tan is a sign of healthiness, and a sign of good looks, or whatever it may be. So yeah, it's really challenging.

Vicky Woodham 11:55

We are fortunate that these days, there are some really good fake tans around and they don't smell as bad, they're not as expensive, they're so easy to put on. You don't even need to go to the beautician and get a spray, you can do it in your bathroom. So, I think that really is a big help and the fact that sun creams as well, I remember putting sun cream on when I was a kid and it was white paste, they are so much better these days and that that's got to make a difference.

Dr Bav Shergill 12:32

One of the reasons why tans make you look healthy is they give you more of an even skin tone and it's quite interesting. So, because a lot of blemishes, so you've got a little bit of mild rosacea or something like that with a bit of a tan, it masks it quite effectively. And a few other blemishes, freckles, and whatnot that you've got. So that's what the human eye sees when it looks at a person with a tan and decides what's healthy because the skin tone is even. Even skin tone makes you look younger, basically. So it's quite interesting why we do things that for sure. I think what you said, Vicki, about getting your safest tan out of the bottles is definitely the way forward.

Matt Gass 13:08

Absolutely, I mean, you talk about how it makes you look younger, because of even skin tone because as we know, the sun exposure is one of the major environmental factors for skin ageing. So, you want to look young, get it out and bottle. So Bav, I suppose a really important thing that we haven't touched on yet is what should people be doing? What's the ideal approach to it because I know a lot of people, the first thing we think about when we think about sun protection is sunscreen and obviously it has a role to play, but it's not the only thing and I think I'd be right in saying that perhaps it shouldn't be the first thing we reach for either.

Dr Bav Shergill 13:48

Yeah, I think behaviour is the first thing really. You won't get sunburnt if you're very careful about avoiding direct sunlight on your skin. On sunny days between 11 and 3, it's a very easy message. You don't have to put some cream on or worry about apparel if you're just not there. If you plan your day accordingly, and make sure that you're indoors at that time having lunch and then go out and having a fantastic morning or a great afternoon during the summer. You're not going to get sunburned, or you'll reduce your risk considerably.

The first thing is knowing when the sun is at its strongest and trying to not be in direct sunlight if you can, if you know people do need to go out and they do need to have some exposure you do need to get a certain amount every day. Then that's where wearing a good quality clothing, the highest factor things you will have on your skin is actually the clothing if you choose the right type of clothing, there's lots of UV approved equipment out there. That looks good, I live on the South coast, so all the kids and the parents now have really cool rash vests on with UV protection when they're out on their paddle boards or going up by the beach, so, they have a really nice day in the sun, with their hats on, and sitting under a parasol, when they're having their lunch and stuff like that by the beach, if the seagulls don't get the sandwiches first, obviously. So yeah, there are good behaviours that you can take to actually make sure that you don't have sunburn. sunscreen is the last defense really, all it does is just delayed the inevitable, it delays some damage on your skin, it doesn't actually form a barrier in the way that you think it does. It just reduces the impact of the sun over a given time. So for example, if you burn in a minute, SPF 50 means you'll burn in 15 minutes, but you will burn. And you know, so it just gives you an idea of how long you can stay out. That's all it does.

Matt Gass 15:43

I think that's really useful that people think about that a little bit more, because so much of the conversation around sun protection is centred around sunscreen and in fact, almost all of it is around sunscreen. It's not to say you can't enjoy the sun. I mean, I don't think we want to say that. But I think, just a bit of conscious thought about how you're going to do that, say, making use of shade, not sitting out for hours on end, you know, maybe you sat down at a bench, which was really comfortable when you sat

down at 11 o'clock to chat with your mates and now it's getting on to 12.30. Have you thought okay, maybe we need to move somewhere else. So, I think it's just going about these things in a sensible way and having people putting some conscious thought into it.

Dr Bav Shergill 16:32

Yeah, I think Vicky's story about, hazy sunshine, in Britain, you can have all kinds of weather just in within an hour, almost, and just here, the sun will break through of some cloud cover. It burns things up and suddenly, you're getting sunburnt on your legs when you didn't expect to because it was murky when you left for the day at the beach. So yeah, you have to have a bit of forethought. Yeah, a bit of planning, just make sure you've got the right kit with you, when you go out. It's just in the same way that you'd have anything else, you know, go out, it just becomes one more thing to do. But it's not a big deal if it's part of your habits.

Harriet Dalwood 17:11

Absolutely, and worth practicing sun safety in the UK. Is the advice that you would give universal for all skin tones? Or does it differ?

Dr Bav Shergill 17:24

I think it's learning to understand your skin and how it behaves in the sun determines just what kind of steps you need to take to make sure you don't burn. If you have richly pigmented skin, a heritage from say, Africa or from India, south or southeast Asia or other parts of the world, you can still burn in the sun, and you can still get skin cancer, not to the same extent in terms of absolute numbers, but it's putting yourself at risk. Again, as Matt said earlier, you're actually ageing your skin as well and that's quite a nice health message to give out to just to be mindful about you do need to use some form of sun protection factor but you have to understand just how long it takes for your skin to burn. What is interesting is if you've got dual heritage and Northern European and say, I know in my case, the Indian background is that your offspring may look quite tanned, but their skin doesn't behave in the same way. They can get red very easily and they can burn so you have to protect them and put them in suits and hats. So yeah, you have to have a fair idea, and when in doubt, if you're slightly over, it's better than being slightly under prepared.

Matt Gass 18:33

Bav, we've talked about practicing sun safety, but what about the signs of skin cancer? I know a lot of people don't check their skin regularly. Perhaps you can explain, how often you should be checking your skin, any tips that you have and what you should be looking for.

Dr Bav Shergill 18:49

So the first things first, you check your skin, no more often than once a month, tops, any more than that, and you won't actually see much of a difference if you're looking every day. So, once a month, I often advise men to check themselves for testicular lumps, check their skin is five minutes to do both easily and ask themselves the question about bleeding and so on, and peeing and things like that.

A very easy checkup for women, check your breasts at least once a month, and then check around your body at the same time. It is really difficult if you haven't got someone at home with you to help you check. But even saying that it's a lot of pressure to put on someone else to make a comment on whether your moles are different or not. So often we ask that you know if you can get a mirror set up to have a look at your bank, that's great. If you had to take a photograph on your phone and then analyze it and look at it, that's fine too. You can take photographs and store them; the cameras are fantastic on phones these days. So, once a month is how often you should check your skin. In terms of what you should look out for, so, it's all about the changing things on your skin and so you need to learn to understand and have a good idea of what your skin's normally like. So, say for example, you've got a spot that doesn't seem to heal for two or three weeks after it's come up, that's a little bit unusual. If that doesn't normally happen if it's on a sun exposed site, head and neck or torso or forearms, that could easily be one of these non-melanoma skin cancers, such as basal cell carcinoma, if you have a lump that suddenly comes up and it's tender and painful, and not producing pus, you often see that in slightly older patients, maybe 40s plus, that could be something called a squamous cell carcinoma. and they're very easily dealt with, again, as Vicky was saying about pathways of care.

You see a GP, you're in a hospital within two weeks to see a dermatologist and then surgery within four weeks after that. But, then obviously, the thing that everybody worries about the most is melanoma. So, you get to know your moles and embrace them and love them for what they are. But if there's change in any of them, or if you get a new one that wasn't there before, and you're not sure, and it's got a few odd features, which I'm going to go through, then you should definitely seek help and advice. So, the things to look out for change either in a preexisting mole or a new thing that comes up is the ABCDE rule.

Asymmetry, so they're a bit asymmetric, which means that they're not perfectly rounded shape, one side is a bit different to the other. B is border, the borders a bit blurry, a bit fuzzy, or slightly, scalloped, a bit bitten into. C, is the colour as the colours changing, either getting darker or lighter. D, diameter. I mean, we're kind of changing that little bit now, but generally, if it's getting bigger and bigger than the end of a pencil, that's definitely a time to get things checked out. E is probably for really for seeing an expert. If you're worried about anything at all.

Matt Gass 21:43

Do you think you could just talk a little bit about skin cancer in people of colour? So, you know what to look for?

Dr Bav Shergill 21:50

When you talk about skin cancer, for example, one of the very common skin cancers, it's not that common, but you see it more in groups with richly pigmented skins. Subungual melanoma is a melanoma underneath the nail or on the palms and soles of your feet. Obviously, Bob Marley died of a subungual

melanoma, it's something that we do see in that particular group. These are dark marks underneath the nails that are irregularly shaped or growing, it's worth getting checked out. The thing is, though, and I've got one of them as well, which is sort of a normal kind of pigmented line underneath my nail, but it hasn't changed. So, I keep an eye on it every now and then in clinic, and just make sure, and I've got a photograph on my phone to check it against as well, just to make sure every now and then to stop that three o'clock in the morning worry. I've seen basal cell carcinomas in patients from India and Pakistan. These are often a bit darker. Normal basal carcinomas in European skin types are pink, and they bleed easily. These were slightly darker, but they bled, so, a lesion that's bleeding, that's not healing up. Often patients say, you know, I've got a spot, I thought it was just a spot. If you've got something like that, that hasn't sorted itself out after two or three weeks, you do need to go and get it checked out. Regardless.

Matt Gass 23:10

Absolutely, I think one of the things that we can mention actually is you're looking for often an ugly duckling type of mole, it's not a hard and fast rule, but for most people, their moles tend to be fairly similar and follow a sort of type don't they on the whole.

Dr Bav Shergill 23:29

Yeah, just realise that that nodding on a podcast doesn't actually help (laughs). No, it's true, if you've got a mole on the skin that's very different to all the others, then that is the one that I'm worried about. That's the one I want to hear about. That's the one I want to have a look at. But I want all your moles to put it into context, and that's what I do when I do a skin checkup. You know, while just honing in on that one mole that someone's come in with. There is a reason why people come and see you because they have a feeling that something isn't quite right and so it's up to me to see and address the reasons why it may not be right.

Harriet Dalwood 24:02

This is quite a loaded question, I suppose. How do you think we can reduce the rates of skin cancer? Is it an impossible task? I mean, obviously, rates are rising. What do you guys think?

Vicky Woodham 24:15

it's probably better for Bav but I mean, one of the things I always think is that if the rates are rising, that means people are getting diagnosed, and people are getting treated. So, a lot of the awareness activities that have gone before mean that people like me know what to look out for and go and see the doctor, and, you know, aren't scared to go and get it checked out, and I think although one day we want to see those numbers go down. Actually, if we can get a lot of early diagnosis and treatment. That's brilliant because I was 39 when I was diagnosed, and I want to have a long healthy life. So yeah, I'm glad I got it checked out and I'm glad I got it treated.

Dr Bav Shergill 25:01

Yeah, that's absolutely right. That's really eloquent, far better than I would put it actually, to be honest with you, right? Vicky, you've got to get them picked up. There's an increase in numbers, that doesn't matter, what it means is we're better at picking these things up and treating them. In terms of cancer biology, that's a different ask. Now, that's all about accumulating mutations due to some exposure over a lifetime to steer that ship in a different direction, will take a few decades, if we all have good healthy behaviours, or the majority do now. So, we won't see the benefit of these interventions. But our children will, I'm hoping. And so, the overall rate ideally will go down due to that kind of prevention. But we want to prevent, skin cancer vision prevention, as Vicky quite rightly says, it's not just about preventing the disease ever coming, but it's also preventing the negative impacts of the disease. So, that's the other side of sun awareness week. We want to make sure that all our community has long happy, healthy lives, doing the things that they love. And to do that, if you know, we can just do very simple interventions at an early stage, we can achieve that goal.

Matt Gass 26:10

Yeah, I think that's really important, and I think you're right, you're absolutely right in saying that, on its own. Reducing the number of skin cancers in isolation isn't the most important thing because it's inevitable that skin cancer rates will go up as we have an ageing population. People have more accumulative sun exposure over the course of their lives because they're living longer. So, you know, on its own, it's in isolation, it's not the be all and end all. But absolutely, I think it is important in the long term that people do think carefully about their sun habits, and we pass on good some behaviour habits to our children and to the future generations. So yeah, I think those are all really good points.

Dr Bav Shergill 26:55

But it's interesting that it wasn't just one thing I wanted to say about changing behaviours, we always think it's going to take ages and ages and ages, but I didn't think I'd see the turn against smoking in my lifetime, the turning against drink driving, for example, and how socially unacceptable that is, these things have all happened, and because we all want it to happen, it's like most of the behaviours in society, if we're all unified, and changing that behaviour, we will do it.

Vicky Woodham 27:22

Look at Australia, the culture is so different over there, my brother-in-law lives over there, and my niece is growing up. And, you know, her attitude to being out in the sun is so different to my kids, and I keep trying to instill in them, they had such bad incidents and such high incidence over there, but they've really got their act together. And we could learn from that example.

Matt Gass 27:49

Absolutely. I mean, I would say Australia's great disadvantage when it comes to skin cancer, which is also a great advantage, which is their climate, they've got such an extreme climate, that obviously means that they've had higher rates of skin cancer for many years. But I do think part the reason why they've been able to be so successful is because it's so self-evident to their population, that this climate is trying to kill you. A little dramatic, perhaps, but you know, I think it's a really important point, though, because it is a challenge for us to get that across to people in the UK, because, you know, particularly if you've had a completely washed-out summer, and suddenly a few sunny days come along, it's really challenging to be the voice of reason, in that situation.

Dr Bav Shergill 28:37

Say to people about lockdown lifting or the easing of lockdown. Everyone's going to go crazy, go outdoors, and they are just going to go Yeah! I'm outside! It's fantastic with my friends. All six of us have to sit outside with a slightly dodgy bag for the tinnies and then we're going to sit outside in the sun going to get burnt. And you know, that really wasn't the message about easing lockdown.

Harriet Dalwood 29:02

Yeah, I feel like that's already happening, which is pretty worrying. I think today's a fairly nice day. And it was nice. The other day I had a quick walk in the park with sunscreen on and yeah, I know if those groups just like sitting out in the sun and have probably been there for a few hours, I imagine, and it is a bit worrying. Definitely.

Matt Gass 29:26

It's about getting across those habits, isn't it? And it's not that we want to be really judgy I think public health messaging when you're acting as you're coming across as just really some judgmental nannying people doesn't go across well but it's it is just trying to instill in people those good behaviours so that even amongst every sort of lovely group of lads with a bunch of tinnies in the park, it's not completely socially unacceptable to be okay, can we go sit under this tree now instead and wear a hat instead. Maybe put some sunscreen on. Yeah, I mean, hopefully the messaging is getting out there and that's the importance of Sun Awareness Week. So unfortunately, I think that's all we got time for. But Bav, Vicky, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been really helpful and hopefully everybody's learned a lot about sun awareness week, sun protection, and signs skin cancer.

Vicky Woodham 30:20

Thank you for having me. I hope it makes a difference.

Harriet Dalwood 30:23

A brilliant guest today we're Dr. Bav Shergill and Vicky Woodham, and we really appreciate them taking the time out of their day to talk about sun protection and sun awareness. If you do want any further information on this topic or need any advice at all, please do visit our patient hub at www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk and visit the sun awareness page. To keep up to date with the podcast you can find us at Dermtested on Instagram and Twitter. And we'd also invite you to join in the conversation around Sun Awareness Week. You can find information resources on the BAD social media channels, or you can use the hashtag SunAwarenessWeek.

Matt Gass 31:04

Great. Well, I look forward to hopefully seeing you on social media. In the meantime, we'll be back in two weeks' time and we will be talking all about

Harriet Dalwood 31:12

Can't wait.