

# Sunny DAZE

THINK SKIN CANCER IS NOT YOUR PROBLEM? THINK AGAIN.

By Celia Shatzman

**P**atients ask me all the time, "Why did I get skin cancer if I'm brown?" says Maritza Perez, a dermatologist affiliated with Columbia University. "They're totally in shock." That's one of many popular misconceptions the Puerto Rican skin expert illuminates for us, separating fact from fiction by debunking five common myths.

**MYTH 1:**  
DARKER SKIN MAKES YOU LESS SUSCEPTIBLE TO SKIN CANCER.

"Sixty to eighty percent of skin cancers are caused by ultraviolet light," says Dr. Perez, "and all of us, no matter what amount of pigment is in our skin, are going to receive those ultraviolet lights." While melanin can block a small amount, it's definitely not enough protection. In fact, studies show that when people of color are diagnosed with skin cancer, it has often progressed to a later, more lethal stage because they think they're not prone to it.

**MYTH 2:**  
A TAN SHIELDS YOU FROM HARM.

"A suntan will not protect you from accumulated damage," Dr. Perez says. "You're increasing the chances of cancer and aging." And, she cautions, never visit a tanning bed—doing so makes it five times more likely that you will develop melanoma during your lifetime. Dr. Perez believes tanning beds should be illegal since they have contributed to the dramatic increase in melanoma in young women. Spray tans are the best way to add color, she believes. "I tell my patients the only safe tan is a tan in a can."



**MYTH 3:**  
TOO MUCH SUN IS THE ONLY CAUSE OF SKIN CANCER:

"There is a multiplicity of causes for the disease, and not understanding the causes can expose the Latina population to unnecessary risk," Dr. Perez says. "Some people are genetically predisposed to it, and other health conditions, such as warts and human papillomavirus, are also associated with skin cancer." Greater awareness and vigilance, she stresses, lead to better prevention and earlier detection.

**MYTH 4:**  
DETECTION IS THE DOCTOR'S RESPONSIBILITY.

"Everyone should perform a monthly self-exam and see a dermatologist yearly," Dr. Perez says. Here's what to look out for: basal cell carcinoma is a red bump with many little broken blood vessels on areas of frequent exposure, or a red rash that doesn't heal; squamous cell carcinoma is a crusted red rash, or an ulcer that doesn't heal; and melanoma is a dark-pigmented lesion with varied color and an irregular border.

**MYTH 5:**  
ALL SUNSCREENS ARE EQUAL.

Actually, some sunscreens offer far greater protection. Dr. Perez advises checking the label for protection against both UVA and UVB light, a minimum SPF of 30 and water resistance. Other tips: Reapply sunscreen every two hours; avoid the sun at peak hours (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.); seek shade and wear protection—a hat, sunglasses and clothing. "I have olive skin, and I wear sunblock every day of my life," she says.