Protect Yourself Against Ultraviolet Radiation Fatality File

“My Wife Noticed a Weird Freckle”

I was always pretty convinced that I’d get skin cancer. I was a professional bike racer in the 80s, and nobody wore sunscreen back then. In fact, I’d go out and purposely try to lay down a base tan. Plus, I lived in Texas for much of my young adult life, where it’s warm and sunny even in the winter months.

In a nutshell, I’m the poster child for what not to do when it comes to skin cancer. Yet while I knew the odds were high that I’d get squamous or basal cell carcinoma—the most common and most treatable forms of skin cancer—melanoma didn’t cross my mind.

In 2005, when I was 47, my wife pointed out a little mole near my ear and nudged me to go to the dermatologist. I’d see it when I shaved, but didn’t think much of it. I definitely would’ve put off making an appointment if it wasn’t for my wife’s insistence.

After a biopsy, I got the diagnosis: Stage 2 melanoma. I thought: This could be really bad. Regardless of where it is, cancer is scary. And my cancer was on my face. Luckily, the melanoma hadn’t spread to my lymph nodes, and so the surgery was relatively straightforward. However, a year and a half later, my mole came back in the same spot near my ear—and it was twice as big.

That time, the surgery was trickier. I went through 12 hours of biopsies alone just to determine where it stopped. Some people think skin cancer isn’t a big deal—you just have the doctor ‘cut it out.’ I can tell you this: The sound of those biopsies was like a giant meat cleaver scraping against a mirror. It was awful. The good news is my doctor was able to get all of the cancer, which was still Stage 2 and had not spread.

Now I wear sunscreen, see my dermatologist twice a year, and go back any time my wife or I spot something that we think needs investigating. It’s so important to have a doctor who you can call when you see something. And, honestly, it’s also important to have your partner or a friend help you with skin checks.

Men aren’t very good about getting to the doctor. My dermatologist told me that if I had waited a year, my melanoma would’ve been Stage 3 or 4. If I’d waited two years, I’d likely be dead.