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Wake up and **listen** to a derm who had skin cancer

Ellen Marmor, M.D., admits to being sun-clueless before she became a dermatologist—and she has the scars to prove it. Take her lessons to heart so you don't follow in her footsteps.

I don't often get acne, so when a hard, pink pimple appeared on my nose one day in 2006, I suspected it might be something more. I casually showed the bump to at least a dozen of my dermatologist colleagues that week—all said, "It's just acne! Don't worry." I *was* pregnant at the time. Maybe it was a breakout, I hoped. But the pimple never came to a head, and after a week, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. It didn't bleed, it didn't itch, it didn't grow (all signs of cancer), but it also didn't go away. So I asked my mentor, Dr. Leon Bernstein, to biopsy it for me, even as

I told myself not to worry. After all, I'm a dermatologist who wears SPF 50 every day, all day long. A few days later, I had just walked off the set of Fox News after a TV segment on skin cancer when he called me with the results. "Elle, it's cancer," he said.

I stopped dead in my tracks, his words smashing into me like a physical shock. Everything around me on the street in noisy midtown Manhattan seemed to fall silent, but the colors looked hyper-bright. Mentally scrambling, I thought, *Wait, this is just one of his practical jokes!* (Dr. Bernstein is kind of famous for them.) ►



A sun-safe family Marmur, with her four kids in Sagaponack, NY, has become "addicted to hats" and makes sure her kids wear 'em too, plus sun-protective clothing.



Doctor as patient Ellen Marmur immediately post-surgery (left), and all stitched up (right).

I laughed. "Right, exactly! So what is it?"
 "No, Elle, it's really cancer," he said. "Basal cell carcinoma. We need to do surgery on it. When can you come in?"

Now, I know basal cell carcinoma in all of its forms and presentations. I know that it's almost always curable—and I know how to cure it. I even do high-level genetic research on it and drug development studies to treat it. But all that knowledge did not change the fact that in that moment, I did what I've seen many of my patients do over the years: I let my fear run away with me. Anything could happen! What if I hadn't caught it early enough and the cancer had already spread to my lungs or liver? In fact, basal cell cancers rarely

metastasize, but I was shaken. My armor of being the "skin expert" and the "cancer fighter" had been pierced. I have delivered this kind of news to hundreds of patients as a dermatologist and surgeon—but now I knew how it felt to hear it.

No one can prepare themselves for a skin cancer diagnosis, but I shouldn't have been surprised. The fact is, I did everything wrong when I was younger. I had blistering sunburns as a kid while visiting my grandparents in Florida. I was on the swim team all through school in Pennsylvania and never wore sunblock at practice or meets. I hit tanning salons before prom. In the summer, my friends and I would slather ourselves in baby oil and have competitions to see who could get tannest. After college, I led wilderness survival trips and was outside on lakes and rivers 12 hours a day. At that point I knew to wear sunblock, but I'd put it on once and forget to reapply every few hours like you need to. By the time I started studying dermatology in medical school at the age of 25, I already had signs of extreme sun damage. I was covered with freckles, especially on my face, and I had melasma—brown splotches caused by a combination of sun exposure and hormones, like the ones in birth control pills—on my lips, cheeks, and forehead. Still, it wasn't until I got that first biopsy that my risk became real to me.

The treatment I received was very typical for a non-melanoma skin cancer: Mohs surgery. Mohs is a technique that allows the surgeon to look through a microscope while doing the surgery to make sure that every last cancerous cell is cut away. It went well, and in the skilled hands of Dr. Bernstein, the scar on the side of my nose is barely noticeable. People say it looks like I have a dot of powdered sugar on my face. My scar has reassured many a patient as they head into surgery themselves. ▶

What skin cancer looks like

Compare these spots with ones you've got, and if anything looks familiar, see a dermatologist right away. But remember: Skin cancer can come in many shapes, sizes, and colors. And if *any* spot, bump, mole, or scar seems "off," has changed, has started itching or bleeding, or is different or darker than your usual freckles and spots, you should get it checked out.



MELANOMA
Often has irregular borders or uneven colors or textures. This is the most dangerous form of skin cancer.



SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA
May manifest as scaly red patches, open sores, or wart-like bumps.



BASAL CELL CARCINOMA
Often looks like a shiny bump, or a pink or red growth. Can also look like scar tissue.



ACRAL LENTIGINOUS MELANOMA
May appear as freckles or dark splotches on nail beds or the undersides of hands and feet, especially in people of color. Rare, but potentially deadly.

But it wasn't too long before I went under the knife again: Just last year, another "pimple" popped out on my cheek, under my eye. This time I was pretty sure it was only a blemish; a colleague injected steroid into the bump, and, like a pimple, it shrunk. But it returned within a few days and then persisted. That's when I knew. When the biopsy came back as a basal cell carcinoma, I wasn't shocked, just a little depressed. This scar could be disfiguring because it was in the middle of my face. Pretty soon I'd be covered in scars, I thought. I had Mohs surgery again, and Dr. Jesse Ting, my plastic surgery colleague and friend, stitched it beautifully (see pics of me after the surgery, previous page). Six months and a few Vbeam laser treatments later, the scar that was over an inch long—stretching from under my eye onto my nose—is surprisingly faint.

That said, my face has changed, along with my approach as a doctor and a mom. These brushes with skin cancer have made me even more vigilant with my own health and that of my four kids (ages 14, 8, 7, and 5). I have become addicted to sun hats—no flimsy straw for us; the more tightly woven the material, the more protective it is. My kids and I wear sun-protective rash guards and hats when we're at the beach or pool, and they know that sunscreen is a must.

At work, I'm way more empathetic. As doctors, we often need to depersonalize certain things—like slicing open another human being's skin—so that we can do our jobs. But I'm able to relate and be more of a comfort outside the operating room, because I know how bad a biopsy or injection can feel. I can talk through patients' fears and answer the question "Will it hurt?" with real-world experience! I also give better advice: When I see patients with that "It can't happen to *me*" attitude, I simply point to my scars as proof that, yes, it can. When I tell them it's important to wear SPF daily, to put on hats in the sun, and to get yearly skin checks, it's not a lecture, it's me sharing my experience. I learned this stuff the hard way, and quite simply, I want to save you and your family from doing the same. ●

Ellen Marmur, M.D., is vice chair of cosmetic and dermatologic surgery at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City and author of the book Simple Skin Beauty.



Recipe for an amazing summer: Swipe on sunblock, add umbrella.

Your sunscreen shopping list

Dermatologist Ellen Marmur, M.D., loves to buy sunscreen in bulk at Costco or whenever it goes on sale at the drugstore. "I don't think there's one specific brand that's superior to others. The fact that you have one and use it is what makes it better!" she says. "I usually have about 15 different kinds on hand that my husband, my kids, and I use. Getting kids to wear sunblock takes some creativity, so I pull out a bunch of sticks and sprays and lotions and let them choose." That said, Marmur does have some guidelines and personal favorites. Here's what she says every woman should keep in her bathroom or beach bag:



Daily serum to wear under makeup

Marmur smooths on a light serum every morning, like L'Oréal Paris Sublime Sun Liquid Silk Sunshield for Face SPF 50+, \$10.90, or Supergoop! SPF 30+ City Sunscreen Serum, \$42.

Stick for around the eyes

"I'm seeing more and more skin cancers around women's eyes, because we don't tend to pile on the sunblock there for fear of stinging. Sticks are great for beach days or exercising outdoors because they stay put and won't sweat into your eyes," says Marmur. She uses Coppertone Water Babies Sunscreen Stick SPF 55, \$6.99. Another to try: Banana Boat Ultra Defense Sunscreen SPF 50 Stick, \$4.69.



Mineral sunscreen for face

Marmur loves NIA 24 Sun Damage Protection 100% Mineral Sunscreen SPF 30, \$45, for outdoor days. We like La Roche-Posay Anthelios 50 Tinted Mineral, \$32.95.

Broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher for body

Two good picks for your next vacation: Coppertone Wet 'n Clear SPF 30 spray, \$9.99, and Neutrogena Ultimate Sport Sunblock Lotion SPF 30, \$9.50.

