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This Doctor's Brush With Skin Cancer Inspired Her to Launch a Safe Sun Movement

Ellen Marmur, M.D., shares the wake-up call that became her call to action, educating others how to have fun in the sun—the skin-safe way.

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By: Erin Reimel



Courtesy of Dr. Ellen Marmur

It's no surprise that, as a board-certified dermatologist who served eight years as chief of dermatological surgery at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City, [Ellen Marmur, M.D.](#), is devoted to maintaining healthy skin. But, yes, even dermatologists can get skin cancer.

In 2006, when she was in her 30s, Dr. Marmur noticed a spot on her nose and asked several fellow dermatologists to take a look—all of them told her it was rosacea. In fact, it wasn't until her eighth opinion, a surgeon who specializes in [skin cancer](#) treatment, that her suspicion was confirmed: The firm, pimple-like bump that refused to heal was actually [basal cell cancer](#). She had it treated with two stages of [Mohs micrographic surgery](#). A second spot that appeared on her cheek three years later also turned out to be basal cell cancer and led to another Mohs surgery. Though she was again cancer-free, the experience had a lasting impact on her formerly outdoorsy lifestyle.

“After my skin cancers, I realized I was afraid to spend time outdoors, as if one hour in the sun was going to ignite a [melanoma](#),” says Dr. Marmur, the founder of Marmur Medical in New York City and of the MMSkincare line of products. As a mom and avid hiker, swimmer, and tennis player, Dr. Marmur decided she needed to get over her fear of the sun and focus on responsibly enjoying its benefits. So, in 2014, she launched the [Skin Cancer, Take a Hike!](#) (SCTAH) awareness campaign, with a bucket-list trek up Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, along with 11 others who had been impacted by skin cancer.

“I started SCTAH to inspire us all to live our lives to the fullest—outside—safely,” says Dr. Marmur, who has since organized hikes to locales including Patagonia, Chile, and Alaska. The hiking program—which also holds events throughout the U.S.—raises money for the American Academy of Dermatology’s (AAD) [SPOT Skin Cancer](#) campaign. The funds go toward free skin cancer screenings, grants to install shade structures, and materials on skin cancer prevention. (Inspired to kick off a group hike for the cause, too? Get started with [this AAD link](#).)

As skin cancer—the [most common](#) of all cancers—is still [on the rise](#), Dr. Marmur spoke to us about why she is more committed than ever to raising skin cancer awareness while celebrating the joys of the great outdoors.

HealthCentral: After having had skin cancer, are there any extra steps you take now to protect your skin outdoors that you didn’t before being diagnosed?

Ellen Marmur, M.D.: I competed for darker tans before, now pale is my goal—a tan line fills me with regret. The good news is, I am outside living my life to the fullest on the beach, playing tennis, hiking, and everything I want. But I wear light protective clothing and [mineral SPF](#) with gusto.

HC: What are some of the important skin protection steps that people often miss?

Dr. Marmur: Most people still lie to themselves about using sun protection measures every day. Being more consistent and covering your skin with clothing and SPF is an easy win.

On a normal workday, applying a moisturizer with SPF before heading out to work and reapplying before you head home is enough—unless you sit next to a window, which allows UV rays in. In that case, be sure to reapply.

I love tinted SPF and apply it gently over my makeup, especially on the nose. And I keep a good hat at my desk to shield my skin during mid-day lunch breaks. I often wear a big scarf to keep covered and I love comfy, light sweatpants to walk on the beach.

HC: What are some areas of the body people forget to protect from the sun?

Dr. Marmur: I see a lot of cancer spots around the eyes, so I use a tinted SPF on my upper and lower eyelids every day. Women also tend to get melanomas on the legs because they either intentionally tan them or forget to apply sunscreen. Areas like the scalp, neck, ears, and hands are also especially vulnerable.

HC: How often do you do your own skin checks?

Dr. Marmur: Weekly! I check in the mornings as I am getting dressed and, yes, in the big mirror I check my back. I look for [extra dark spots, or spots that alert my radar](#) that it might be new or changing. If I feel it looks suspicious, I have a dermatologist shave it off and send it for testing ASAP within days of my concern.

In 2013, the skin cancer on my nose recurred and I had another surgery in three stages to remove it down to cartilage. Another spot on my knee was super dark and I'd never seen it before. I was shocked when the pathology report said it was an evolving [melanoma](#). A colleague excised it and stitched it immediately without a trace.

HC: Since launching the Skin Cancer, Take a Hike! program nearly a decade ago, how has it helped get the message out about skin cancer?

Dr. Marmur: We've raised over \$2.5 million to help prevent skin cancers by raising awareness and education in [areas where the ozone is depleted](#) like [Patagonia](#). The hikes have raised more funds for the AAD than any other member initiative! We've provided [shade structures](#) [permanent canopies at public playgrounds, pools, and other outdoor recreation areas] that have protected hundreds of thousands of people from excess sun, and we've funded skin cancer screenings that have detected thousands of melanomas and saved hundreds of lives. Everyone needs to protect themselves because we all have skin and skin is truly injured by too much radiation from the sun.

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