

Skin

Here's How Israel Reduced Skin Cancer Rates. Could the Same Approach Work Here?



Korin Miller
Writer
August 17, 2016



Israel has dramatically lowered death rates from skin cancer in the past five years, thanks to an aggressive campaign against the disease.

“We were third in the world in the incidence and mortality after Australia and New Zealand, and it was, of course, because we have a lot of people who come from Europe with light skin,” Miri Ziv, director general of the Israel Cancer Association (ICA) told *The Media Line*, as reported in the *Jerusalem Post*. “In the past five years, Israel dropped to the 20th country with the highest incidence (of skin cancer) and, in terms of mortality, we dropped to number 13 for men and number 20 for women.”

The country used a three-pronged approach, focusing on raising awareness, helping Israelis identify the signs of skin cancer, and research on the disease. The ICA also created skin care apps, such as “DermaCompare,” which helps users document their moles. In addition, the country created new immunotherapy drugs to fight skin cancer.

The ICA also pushed Israelis to be smarter about the sun. “We disseminated our sun-smart stuff in TV programs and in the media,” says Ziv. “Every summer we launch the early detection project, and we encourage people to avoid sunbathing from 10 to 4.” (Ziv also points out that while melanoma is rising significantly for most of the world, its rate has stabilized in Israel.)

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, making Israel's news noteworthy for the U.S. too.

Could we accomplish the same thing stateside? Experts say yes — but we need to do our part.

“There is constant sun-smart education from the dermatologists in the United States and from the American Academy of Dermatology,” Gary Goldenberg, MD, medical director of the Dermatology Faculty Practice at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells Yahoo Beauty. However, he says, *we're just not listening*.

For example, the American Academy of Dermatology recommends that people get a full skin examination annually after the age of 18, but Goldenberg says few people actually do it.

Americans also need to encourage sun-smart behaviors from an early age. “Since too many people have used or are using tanning beds, we are seeing skin cancer in younger and younger patients,” he says. “Finding these lesions early will improve survival and decrease mortality.”

New York City dermatologist Doris Day, MD, agrees, telling Yahoo Beauty that “awareness is a big thing.” Day says there are big misconceptions about sun exposure that are still all too common — and they can be potentially dangerous. “People really think that if it's cloudy outside or they're not at the beach, they're not at risk,” she says. “They tend to think that if they're not tanning ‘on purpose’ or they're wearing sunscreen, then they're not tanning. They have a false sense of security.”

There are also everyday things that we don't think about that can be problematic, Day says, like the fact that sunscreen is classified as a drug (this allows the Food and Drug Association to regulate it but also means that children have to see the nurse if they want it during school hours) and the reality that many sporting events provide little to no shade.

Sunscreen usage is also problematic. While many people are aware that sunscreen is important, they don't use it often enough or apply enough when they do, Day says. “People need to be taught to get into the habit of applying sunscreen on a daily basis,” she says.

Our culture's perception of tans as “healthy” is also a concern, Day says, arguing that PSAs featuring sun-smart celebrities like Adele and Taylor Swift would go a long way toward changing public perception.

And finally, Day says most people don't know how to do a skin self-exam or don't know what they're actually looking for. “People only show me raised spots on their skin, and most aren't of any significance,” she says. “We're missing the things they should be showing us.”

Experts stress that we can lower our skin cancer rates — we just aren't there yet. “The three-pronged approach of awareness, identification, and research is very smart, because it focuses on all important aspects of reducing skin cancer numbers and mortality,” Goldenberg says. “The public just needs to pay attention to the dangers of sun exposure.”