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Grey Hair could be a sign your body is fighting off skin cancer



- A new study found that having grey hair may be a sign your body is working to protect you from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.
- Researchers surmise that gray hair is caused by damaged melanocyte stem cells, which would otherwise divide and potentially cause cancer, exiting the body.

- **Dermatologists caution that you should still use sunscreen regularly, whether you have gray hair or not.**

Changing attitudes toward gray hair are causing more women, including celebrities like Jane Fonda, Andie MacDowell, and Melissa Gilbert, to proudly rock their silver locks. And new research is serving up yet another reason to be thankful that you've got some grays: It could be a sign that your body is fighting off cancer.

That's the major conclusion from a buzzy new study published in *Nature Cell Biology*. The study links gray hair with a lower risk of melanoma, but dermatologists warn against thinking you're in the clear if you have a few grays.

Why gray hair may guard against melanoma.

Gray hair doesn't necessarily protect you from developing a future case of melanoma, but it could be a sign that your body has already tried to ward off the disease. "Our study shows that the depletion of melanocyte stem cells functions as a protective mechanism against melanoma," Mohri says. This happens because damaged melanocyte stem cells which could otherwise cause cancer are eliminated from the hair follicle, Mohri explains.

This "makes sense," because the melanocyte stem cells make pigment, says Ife J. Rodney, MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics. "When they're gone, they stop functioning, and you have a loss of pigment in the hair," she says.

What does this mean for your actual melanoma risk?

Dermatologists warn against getting cocky about your risk of developing melanoma—and forgoing the regular use of sunscreen—simply because you have gray hair. It's certainly not guaranteed that you won't get melanoma if you have silver strands, says Gary Goldenberg, MD, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, who sees plenty of patients with the disease who have gray hair.

You have a higher risk of developing melanoma as you get older, and aging is also linked to developing gray hair, Dr. Rodney notes. "I would not use gray hair to predict a higher or lower risk of melanoma," she says. "There are a lot of other variables that can lead to skin cancers." Those include a history of sunburn, chronic sun exposure, and a family history of skin cancer, she adds. Having light skin, light hair, and light eyes, is also linked with an increased risk, along with tanning bed use, Goldenberg says.



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