

# Seth Coombs, MD

Personalized Medical Practice

# HEALTHWISE

News to enrich your lifestyle

Summer 2012

## What Your Skin Might Be Telling You

Summer weather means a change in our clothing to more abbreviated attire that exposes our skin, giving us the opportunity to take a better look at ourselves. Sometimes we're surprised at what we find.

**Age Spots:** Referred to as "sun spots" or "liver spots," (although they have nothing to do with the liver), these flat, brown, gray or black spots form from sun exposure over the years. They most often appear in people over age 40, on parts of the body most exposed to the sun, including the face, hands, arms, legs or back. Whatever you call these spots, they are generally harmless and do not require medical treatment. Recently, some new cosmetic products have been touted to fade their intensity, and the claims appear to have some validity for many consumers. Age spots can be minimized by using a good sunscreen or avoiding direct sun exposure.

**Seborrheic Keratosis:** Middle-aged and older adults might notice the appearance of these small, rough little bumps. They are often flesh colored and can appear anywhere on the body. The American Academy of Dermatology describes these skin growths as having a "waxy, stuck-on-the-skin look." Although they may invoke concern, they are not cancerous or contagious. Such growths can be removed if they are unsightly or cause excessive irritation.

**Rosacea:** This is a chronic, inflammatory skin condition that most commonly affects adults between ages 30 and 60. It causes redness in the face, particularly, and may produce small, red, pus-filled bumps. The Mayo Clinic warns that a number of factors can exacerbate the appearance of rosacea including temperature extremes and sunlight. Sun exposure makes rosacea worse by increasing blood flow to the surface of the skin, as does spicy food, caffeine and alcohol, among others. Topical creams and prescription antibiotics can reduce rosacea's redness and skin-irritation.



**Medication-induced Sunburn:** Exposure to the sun while taking certain medications may cause a rash to develop, which commonly looks like a sunburn. Drugs that may cause a photosensitive reaction include: diuretics, antibiotics, anti-inflammatory medications, high blood pressure and diabetes medications, and some cancer fighting drugs. Not everyone taking these types of medications will develop photosensitivity, but fair-skinned individuals should be especially careful. As with any new prescription, ask your pharmacist or physician about possible sun-drug interactions.

Understandably, what people worry most about is developing skin cancer. Although only a physician can make a definitive diagnosis, there are visible warning signs that may appear with moles on your body. These are most easily remembered with the first five letters of the alphabet—**ABCDE**. Following is a list and description of these characteristics provided by the American Cancer Fund:

- **Asymmetric:** If you draw a line through the mole, the two halves will not match.
- **Border:** The borders tend to be uneven. The edges may be scalloped or notched.
- **Color:** Having a variety of colors is another warning signal. A number of different shades of brown, tan or black on one mole could appear. They may also appear red or blue.
- **Diameter:** Sometimes small when first detected, these moles can grow larger in diameter than the size of a pencil eraser.
- **Evolving:** Any change—in size, shape, color, elevation, or any new symptom such as bleeding, itching or crusting—should be brought to your physician's attention.

Proper skin care, sun protection, regular self-exams and being attuned to body changes year-round can proactively safeguard your skin...and your overall health.

### From the desk of Seth Coombs, MD

Dear Patient:

I always encourage my patients to become their own best health advocate. I believe this is an important role for you to play in our physician-patient partnership. One component of this assignment is to know your own body and listen to what it is showing and telling you.

For example, do you assess how you feel when you get up in the morning? Do you look carefully at your skin as you shower? Do you note and remember those times when you consume foods that clearly do not agree with you?

This Summer issue of *HealthWise* explores topics in which "knowing" our bodies may give us a first alert to a potential problem.

Remember, relaxation is also beneficial to our overall well-being. Enjoy the Summer!

Best of health,

Seth Coombs, MD



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## Aches and Pains...Arthritis?

The human body has a remarkable way of speaking to us. While there may be plausible explanations for certain aches and pains, such as exercise overexertion or the natural aging process, persistent painful joints may indicate a more serious health issue, such as arthritis.

There are two main categories of arthritis in adults, osteoarthritis (primary and secondary) and rheumatoid arthritis.

**Osteoarthritis (OA)** is a chronic disease affecting approximately 27 million Americans. For some unknown reason, more women are affected than men.

Cartilage acts as a cushion between the bones, allowing for easy motion and movement. When cartilage begins to break down over time, its ability to act as a cushion decreases. This causes the bones to rub against one another resulting in stiffness and pain around the affected joint. Arthritis most commonly impacts joints in the hands, neck, lower back, knees and hips, but can occur in any joint in the body.

The Arthritis Foundation and the Mayo Clinic refer to *primary osteoarthritis* as “wear-and-tear” arthritis because, as the name says, it is most commonly related to aging joints and the “wear and tear” that comes with living an active life. However, because OA is a disease, it does not necessarily affect everyone.

*Secondary osteoarthritis* has the same symptoms as primary osteoarthritis, but can develop at a younger age as the result of a specific cause, usually an injury. Obesity also can cause secondary OA. Excess weight places added stress on joints, particularly the knees and hips.

Common symptoms of both primary and secondary OA include: pain in the affected joint during movement; tenderness to the joint upon touch; stiff joints, particularly after periods of inactivity; and loss of flexibility. If these symptoms persist over an extended period of time, it is wise to seek medical attention.

Osteoarthritis is a chronic, degenerative disease that worsens over time. It can be treated but not cured. Treatments are aimed at reduc-

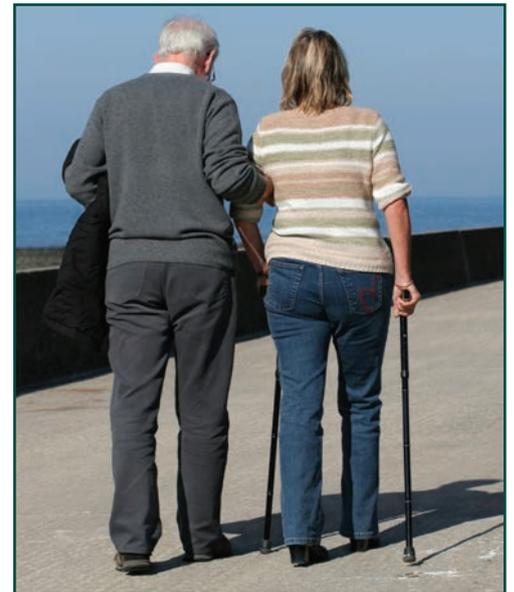
ing pain and maintaining joint movement and function. Depending on the individual, this can be achieved through a variety of medications, physical therapy, and in some extreme cases, joint replacement surgery is indicated.

**Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)** is a chronic autoimmune disease that affects nearly 1.3 million Americans. It also affects more women than men. RA occurs when the body’s immune system, which normally protects the body from bacteria or viruses, mistakenly attacks the body’s own tissues. In RA, this “attack” is aimed at the synovium, a thin membrane lining the joints. This results in a build-up of fluids and painful joint inflammation.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a systemic disease, meaning it can affect the whole body. While those with rheumatoid arthritis may feel pain and stiffness in their joints, fatigue and fever may also be present. Early symptoms of RA tend to occur in the smaller joints first, such as where the hands connect to the fingers, or the toes connect to the feet. Over time, similar symptoms may develop in larger joints throughout the body, such as the knees, hips, elbows and shoulders.

Why certain individuals develop rheumatoid arthritis is uncertain. Clearly, smoking is a risk factor. A combination of genetics and environmental factors, such as a virus or bacteria, also seem to play a certain role. Genetic markers, including those associated with the immune system and chronic inflammation, combined with these environmental factors have been discovered to cause a “tenfold probability of developing rheumatoid arthritis,” according to the Arthritis Foundation.

Rheumatoid arthritis normally develops between the age of 40 and 60, although it can occur at any age. Although there is no known cure for RA, a variety of highly successful treatments exist that can put the disease into remission. Being diagnosed and treated at early onset of the disease has been shown to significantly contribute to remission of the disease. Also, according to the Arthritis Foundation,



there are a variety of drug treatment options, those that relieve symptoms and reduce inflammation and those that can modify the disease or cause remission. A combination of both drugs may be prescribed, as appropriate.

Rheumatoid arthritis can sometimes be difficult to diagnose because its symptoms are similar to those of other diseases, particularly other autoimmune diseases, such as lupus or scleroderma.

**Prevention and Management** Research has shown that regular physical activity—an important factor in overall good health—can be highly successful in helping manage both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Exercise helps keep the muscles around the joints strong and flexible, offering better stabilization of the joints. Exercise also minimizes stiffness because strong, flexible muscles allow for greater range of motion.

Several studies also have shown that in people with arthritis, exercise resulted in increased cartilage and reduced joint inflammation. Shedding excess weight puts less stress on the joints. This can help prevent secondary arthritis (caused by obesity) or ease symptoms associated with primary (wear-and-tear) osteoarthritis.



## Nutrition Corner

### Soy: A Healthy Protein Alternative

Tofu, edamame and soy milk, to name a few, are food derivatives from the soybean. Long a food staple in Asian diets, soy has gained popularity in the United States as a plant-based protein alternative to animal protein.

Proteins are essential for growing and repairing the skin, muscles and vital organs of the body. To assure the body functions in a healthy and efficient manner, it is important to consume a variety of protein sources daily, such as poultry, fish, beef, dairy products, nuts, grains and beans. Soy, like animal proteins, is a complete protein, meaning it contains almost all of the essential protein nutrients the body requires.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that 10% to 35% of our daily calories should come from protein. This translates to approximately 46 grams of protein for female adults and 56 grams for male adults, allowing for age and weight variations.

The Harvard School of Public Health notes that both plant and animal proteins have the same effects on our health. However, they caution that

individuals need to be aware of other nutritional ingredients contained in various animal proteins. As an example, the School noted that a 6-ounce porterhouse steak provides 40 grams of complete protein. However, that same steak also contains 38 grams of fat (or about 60% of the recommended daily allowance for fat consumption). As our culture focuses increasingly on the problems associated with obesity and the positive results achieved by healthy eating, soy products continue to expand in the marketplace, offering an acceptable protein supplement. In contrast to the porterhouse steak, a cup of tofu contains the same 40 grams of protein and only 12 grams of fat. One cup of soy milk contains 11 grams of protein and 4 grams of fat, while whole cow’s milk contains 8 grams of protein and 8 grams of fat.

A word of caution: phytoestrogens are plant hormones found in soy. These have shapes similar to that of human estrogen. Therefore, pregnant women are advised to check with their physician before substituting soy products in their diet. Soy products also contain the natural substance purine, which can worsen symptoms of gout. People with gout should not eat large amounts of soy products. As with any food, moderation is key.

The American Heart Association’s Committee on Nutrition notes that soy foods can be healthy protein choices, particularly as an alternative to foods such as red meat. Soy is low in saturated fat, but contains plenty of vitamins and minerals, and, in some foods such as edamame, plenty of fiber.