

"DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

Sun Worshippers in Sunny Places

Jokes abound about the absence of summer in Britain this year. Normally at this time of year the days are not only very long they are also fairly warm and dry and the bright sun over the green landscape lifts the heart after the long cold dark months of winter. Every season has its attractions in Britain but there is no doubt that Brits like the sun when they can see it and this is increasingly so further north where the summer is shorter although the days happily are longer.

The north of England boasts some World Heritage sites, including Hadrian's Wall which marked a far-flung boundary of the once-mighty Roman Empire. The Romans were flat-earthers and this military posting to the edge of civilisation and perhaps of the world was not popular – the more so during the long harsh winters when the nights are long and the wind and the snow are bitter compared with the gentle warmth of the Mediterranean region in winter.

Against this background, you will understand why tourists from Britain, and especially from further north, flock to the sun whenever they can. I have just moved from the north of England to Mallorca and fortunately I am busy enough to be spared the temptation to sun-bathe for weeks on end. Most of my fellow northerners can be forgiven the odd week or two of holiday to develop their sun tan but those of us who are here all the time need to take a much more cautious view.

The risk of skin cancer, especially malignant melanoma, is now well established and widely publicised and the only precaution one can take is to reduce skin exposure to sun. The use of filter creams is useful but these can no longer be referred to as "sun-blockers" as they do not literally block out the sun's effect but only reduce the intensity by the advertised factor. Clothing is a much more effective sun blocker. It is important to read the instructions on the various creams and lotions and to repeat the applications as recommended and especially after swimming. Skin cancer is more likely at a later date in skin that has been repeatedly burned.

For people who are living and working in our Mallorcan climate there is a daily need to be aware of the risks of over-exposure to sun and to take appropriate action. The benefits are worth having, not only in reducing the risk of skin cancer but also because over-exposure to sunshine is known to accelerate skin ageing.

I have had several patients, usually from Australia or New Zealand where public awareness seems higher, asking me to check their skin moles. All have been well but it may be a help to advise on the appearance of a suspicious lesion. Generally it will have one or more of the following features:

- a new pigmented (black-ish) skin lesion
- change in size, shape and possibly colour of an existing lesion
- an irregular edge rather than a well-defined smooth edge
- smaller but similar lesions developing nearby (satellite lesions)
- bleeding, crusting, itch or irritation

I hope you have a successful sunny but safe summer!

Please email me (kenprudhoe@blueyonder.co.uk) if there are some topics you would like me to think about for future issues although I can't promise to take up all of them!

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