

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs on the critical issue of melanoma. Thank you for your interest in this topic and all the work you have done to improve health education in Maryland.

My name is Dr. Vadim Gushchin. I am a surgical oncologist who serves as the Director of The Melanoma and Skin Cancer Center at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, MD, as well as President of For Care, a non-profit to support melanoma education and awareness. This is a letter to advocate for the inclusion of the importance of sun protection awareness and behaviors in the health education curriculum.

In the United States, more than 2 people die of skin cancer every hour. Melanoma accounts for the majority of these deaths. According to the American Cancer Society, it is estimated that there will be 100,350 new cases of melanoma and 6,850 deaths from disease in the United States in 2020 and the incidence of melanoma has more than doubled in the past 30 years. Within Maryland alone, over 2,000 people are diagnosed with melanoma every year and the incidence of melanoma has increased by over 4.5% per year from 2012-2016. As much as 86% of melanoma diagnoses are due to sun exposure as a child and a *single* blistering sunburn in childhood or adolescence more than doubles a person's risk of developing melanoma later in life.

However, melanoma is preventable with simple healthy behaviors in childhood. Several studies have demonstrated a significant decrease in melanoma incidence and death if healthy sun behaviors were practiced in childhood and adolescence. These behaviors include easy modifications, such as sunlight avoidance during peak hours, the use of protective clothing, like a hat and SPF-proof shirts, and applying sunscreen.

Although the majority of skin cancers and melanomas are diagnosed after the age 50, the damage that was done to cause this deadly disease happened before age 18. Based on epidemiologic data, the CDC promotes school-based efforts, such as offering education and skill-building activities, as effective methods to reinforce the development of healthy sun behaviors. Educating our children and young parents and encouraging them to practice healthy sun behaviors will have the biggest impact on decreasing the incidence of this devastating disease.

I know you heard from Vicky Flowers as well. Unfortunately, her tragic story of losing her son, a young, healthy college athlete, to melanoma is not uncommon. I see it every day in my practice. The one question my patients always desperately ask me is, "What can I do to prevent other melanomas from forming?" Sadly, I only have a disappointing answer that the sun damage experienced during childhood cannot be reversed. The emotional and physical toll this preventable disease puts on patients and families must be stopped.

A lifetime of healthy skin starts with preventing sun damage in childhood. Please consider including the importance of sun protection and promotion of healthy sun behaviors in the health education curriculum.

Sincerely,
Vadim Gushchin, MD, FACS