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State data: Melanoma higher than expected in whitest, wealthiest towns

Some of the wealthiest communities on the South Shore have the highest melanoma skin cancer rates, according to newly released state data, in some cases more than double the expected rates. Local health professionals say the high occurrence of melanoma is likely due to the fact wealthy communities tend to be near the sun-soaked coastline and mostly contain white people.

Some of the wealthiest communities on the South Shore have the highest melanoma skin cancer rates, in some cases more than double the number expected, according to newly released state data.

The latest Cancer Incidence in Massachusetts Report, released by the Department of Public Health this past week, shows that between 2001 and 2005 melanoma occurred well beyond projections in Cohasset, Duxbury, Norwell, Hingham and Milton.

Health professionals say the high incidence of melanoma is likely due to the fact that wealthy communities tend to be near the sun-soaked coast and mostly contain white people, who are 16 times more susceptible to melanoma than blacks.

The report did take race – as well as other factors like age and gender – into account in finding that select communities had higher-than-expected incidences. Factoring in demographic and population figures, for example, melanoma diagnoses in Cohasset, Norwell and Duxbury were more than double what was expected.

“Those towns have a high Caucasian population, and many of these people spend time outdoors doing a lot of recreational activities,” said Dr. George Kroumpouzos, a dermatologist at South Shore Medical Center in Norwell and an assistant professor at Brown University. “I think it’s possibly a combination of environmental factors and ethnic background.”

Of the towns with higher-than-expected melanoma rates, Duxbury, whose population of about 15,000 is 98 percent white, had an exceptionally high rate. In the time period studied, 24 females from Duxbury were diagnosed with the cancer. Compare that to 31 females diagnosed in Plymouth, which has more than three times the population of Duxbury.

Melanoma rise ‘troubling’

Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer and is caused when the skin is exposed to too much ultraviolet light. Melanin-producing cells then begin to grow abnormally and become cancerous. The American Cancer Society estimates there will be 62,000 new cases of melanoma in the United States in 2008, and that 8,400 people will die of the disease.

Dr. Lauren Smith, the state’s chief medical officer, said the towns with high melanoma rates are near beaches, a factor as important as racial makeup. Those who work outside are also more susceptible, she added.

“This particular type of cancer is directly related to sun exposure,” she said. “The places on the shore, you could imagine that people in these areas might be more exposed to the sun because they live in a place where (being in the sun) is a great activity.”

Cohasset exceeded the expected melanoma rate more than any other South Shore town. The state expected a town of its size and makeup to have had about nine cases in the period it studied. There were 29.

“The number observed is substantially more than what we would have expected based on the age and gender distribution in that town,” Smith said.

Cohasset holds health fairs that include melanoma screenings throughout the year, including one planned for Sept. 16 at the Second Congregational Church.

Kroumpouzos said he’s been seeing more “thin” melanomas, the early-stage forms that are smaller and easiest to treat.

Jan Danowski, a Scituate resident and the South Shore director of the Melanoma Education Foundation, said melanoma was underreported in the state before 2001, when the state began to collect data from dermatologists and not just hospitals.

“You would expect to see it go up a little bit,” said Danowski, who lost her husband to melanoma in 1989. “If that has continued, that would be troubling.”

The report found other cancers also prevalent on the South Shore.

Thyroid cancer, which Smith said is being detected more often because of new technology, was double the number expected in Sharon and Hanson, while esophagus cancer and multiple myeloma were especially high in Stoughton.

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The first hot spell of the year, along with the Nantasket Beach Car Show, brought throngs of bathers and traffic congestion to Nantasket Beach in Hull on Sunday. Forecasters say there’s more hot weather ahead. See the complete weather report on Page 36.

Of all South Shore towns, Plymouth most exceeded the state's expectations for all forms of cancer.

From 2001 to 2005, 1,636 Plymouth residents were diagnosed with some form of cancer; 1,391 diagnoses were expected. Multiple myeloma, leukemia and liver cancer were the leading culprits.

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