

Play it safe in the sun

Pro volleyball player speaks out on skin cancer

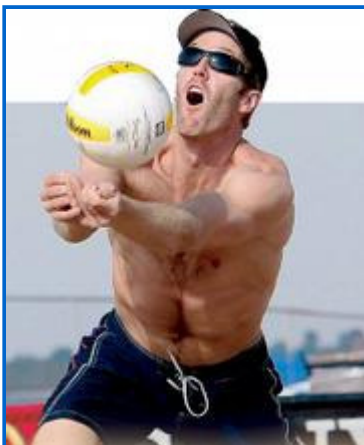
By David Quick
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'Reflect' bracelets

As a reminder to take precautions, 'I Will Reflect' bracelets glow purple when exposed to harmful rays from the sun. The bracelets are available for purchase at The Spa at Charleston Place for a \$2 donation. All proceeds from the sale of the bracelets will go to the MUSC department of dermatology to fund research into the cause and treatment of skin cancer.



HOLLY STEIN

Jeff Nygaard plays volleyball.

Talk about an occupational hazard.

Jeff Nygaard is a professional beach volleyball player in a league known for showing as

much exposed, tanned skin as possible. And he's a skin cancer survivor.

Nygaard, 35, recently made a stop here, albeit a short one, to play in the AVP Crocs Charleston Open. Though he lost in the first round, he was eager to share his message to people: Do everything you can to protect yourself from the sun.

"I'm not saying stay inside all day and avoid the sun. You've got to live your life, but be responsible and take steps to decrease your risk," says Nygaard, who is a spokesman for the Sun Safe Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to reducing skin cancer in the United States.

His message is simple, yet nothing new. Cover up. Use sunscreen with 50-plus SPF (sun protection factor). Get your skin checked by a dermatologist.

Nygaard, who describes himself as a "fair-skinned Norwegian" from Madison, Wis., played indoor volleyball in the 1996 and 2000 Olympics, then switched to beach volleyball in 2002. He has played on the AVP tour for six years and competed in beach volleyball in the 2004 Olympics.

In the first half of the AVP season last year, though, his beach volleyball career took a back seat to his health. A sore in the middle of his back started to itch and bleed. He went to a dermatologist and found out the sore was a basal cell carcinoma. He also discovered he had a melanoma on his left upper bicep.

Both were removed, but the experience shook this otherwise epitome of strength, health and fitness.

"I was scared," recalls Nygaard, who then commenced to telling his story as part of his healing process.

The more he told his story, the more people came to him to tell theirs. Nygaard now looks back at his skin cancer experience as "the best worst thing that ever happened to me."

He's particularly committed to getting the message to parents to protect kids. Part of Nygaard's education on skin cancer was that the damage that he is seeing now probably was caused while he was a child, not in the past half-dozen years playing beach volleyball.

Still, he's taking precautions. He's often the only AVP player who wears a long-sleeve shirt, as much as possible, and he applies and reapplies sunscreen. He adds, "If I don't have my (SPF) 50, I'm not going outside."

Nygaard knows that he and other "sun-safe" advocates have to be diligent.

"We're fighting not only 100 years of perception that a tan is healthy and sexy, but the fact that it takes up to 30 years for skin cancer to show up. If we got sunburned and melanoma showed up the next day, it would be a different story."

His message comes as dermatologists and skin cancer nonprofits raise the volume on the message as the approach of Memorial Day ushers in long days on the beach, boat and parks, and inevitable sunburns, especially in the outdoor-loving Lowcountry.

"Outdoor recreation is a big part of living in the Charleston area, and complete avoidance of the sun is not always realistic. We're encouraging people to reflect on ways to be 'sun safe,' " says Diana Antonovich, a dermatologist at MUSC.

She echoes Nygaard's warnings, including avoiding the midday sun, wearing protective clothing such as wide-brimmed hats, long sleeves and sunglasses, and regular use of a sunscreen with broad-spectrum UV protection.

"Keep in mind the added benefit of protection against not only skin cancer, which is of utmost importance, but also premature aging of the skin."

The National Cancer Institute estimates that in 2008 1 million new cases of nonmelanoma skin cancers and 62,500 new cases of melanoma will be diagnosed. The institute also estimates that 8,400 people will die from melanoma this year.

This month, the Medical University of South Carolina and The Spa at Charleston Place are joining together in a new initiative called "I Will Reflect." The initiative includes having teams of people take the message to the beach, the sale of sun-sensitive wristbands and efforts to train spa workers to look for signs of skin cancer on clients.

"Our staff members are looking at clients' skin every day through a variety of treatments, and so they're really on the front lines of sun protection," says Annette Sanford-Lopez, director at The Spa at Charleston Place. "Even though we all know about the dangers of sun exposure, I think we often need reminders of the steps we should be taking."

Dr. Bruce Thiers, chairman of the Medical University of South Carolina's dermatology department, reminds people that melanoma is a "very curable form of cancer if it's caught early."

"That's why taking some time to reflect on proper skin protection and to schedule an annual skin check with a dermatologist is so important. It's really the simplest steps that can make a big difference."

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