timing is everything

Early detection of melanoma makes a lifesaving difference

Dr. Patricia Collins sought treatment from her own hospital's top team when she was diagnosed with skin cancer.

"It's melanoma." On May 3, when Patricia Collins, MD, an anesthesiologist at Advocate Christ Medical Center, heard those words, she knew it was serious. "I was in a state of shock," she says. "I had seen just how untreatable melanoma can be."

Fortunately for Dr. Collins, a multidisciplinary team at Advocate Christ Medical Center has launched an aggressive new war on melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

SMALL CHANGE, BIG DIFFERENCE

A few days earlier, Dr. Collins had decided to visit Rajendra Shah, MD, a plastic surgeon at Advocate Christ Medical Center, to check a mole on her back, because of a change in appearance that her husband had noticed. "As soon as Dr. Shah looked at it, he said that it needed to be removed immediately," she says.

A week later, when Dr. Collins returned to Dr. Shah's office for the results of her biopsy, he was clearly agitated. "I knew something was up," she says, "and, sure enough, it was melanoma." Dr. Shah outlined the treatment and the pair discussed who should perform the surgery. "Everyone said that it had to be Dr. Adam Riker, because melanoma is his personal area of study," Dr. Collins says.

Adam Riker, MD, FACS, medical director of the Cancer Institute at Advocate Christ Medical Center and a melanoma expert, leads a multidisciplinary team of specialists—including surgical, medical and radiation oncologists and research nurses—who manage all aspects of a melanoma patient's care.

"Dr. Riker couldn't have been kinder," Dr. Collins reports. "Not only is he knowledgeable, he explains the situation very clearly and doesn't sugarcoat anything."

Because melanoma can quickly spread to the lymph nodes, a sentinel lymph node biopsy was scheduled for two days later.

"At the procedure, my Christ Medical Center family greeted me with smiles, and my nurses were amazing, efficient and kind," says Dr. Collins. "I had very little pain and was able to leave quickly. Then, the waiting game began."

Because Dr. Collins was experiencing some swelling the day after the surgery, she stopped at Dr. Riker's office ahead of her scheduled follow-up. That's when she heard the good news: The biopsy was negative; the cancer had not spread to the lymph node. "I can't tell you the joy I felt," she says. "There were hugs and thanks all around."

A LEADING MELANOMA PROGRAM

Dr. Riker developed a special interest in melanoma while completing his surgical oncology fellowship at the National Cancer Institute. "It is one of the most rapidly growing cancers in the United States today and is responsible for six out of every seven skin-cancer related deaths," he says. He is working to raise awareness about the importance of early detection and prevention. "We're also working to provide a growing portfolio of cutting-edge clinical trials for patients with advanced melanoma," he adds.

PATRICIA'S DOCS

Adam Riker, MD
Medical Director of the Cancer Institute

Rajendra Shah, MD
Plastic Surgeon

TOO MUCH SUN?

Is it too much sun that causes melanoma? "Whether it is from sunburns as a teenager or tanning bed use, it is the cumulative damage to our DNA caused by too much sun—as well as genetic factors—that contribute to the development of a melanoma," says Dr. Adam Riker. "Early detection and prevention are the keys to good outcomes."

SLATHER IT ON—Use sunscreen (at least SPF 30) every day.

CHECK YOURSELF—Scan your own moles and freckles for changes in size, shape or color every one to two months.