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# SPACE CENTER Roundup

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## Astronaut, others tell of skin cancer tragedy, survival *JSC kicks off Solar Safe campaign*

By Mary Peterson

It began as just a little dark mole, not even as wide as a pencil eraser, on the back between the shoulder blades. It was not even where the sun usually shines. Yet, in less than four short years, Diana Ashby, late wife of Astronaut Jeff Ashby, succumbed at the age of 33.



Jeff Ashby

Now, as painful as those memories are, Jeff Ashby speaks freely of his late wife's premature end in the hope of sparing others a similar fate. "Six months before I lost Diana," he recalls, "my fellow astronaut and friend, Lacy Veach, also died of the disease. Both of their cancers, malignant melanoma, started as a small mole on the back and progressed almost identically."

In Diana Ashby's case, and similarly in that of Veach, the mole was not painful. Usually they're not. Neither did it bleed. It was very small and had just begun to show signs of change when it was removed.

What might have been the end of the story was followed by major surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments – all fruitless attempts to stem the spread of the melanoma throughout her body. "It is important for people to remember," Ashby said, "that while skin cancer starts in your skin, it can metastasize, move into the bloodstream, and affect all of your major organs, including the brain." Typical lifespan is about three years. Diana survived nearly four.

Barry Waddell, business manager for the International Space Station Program, is a warm, affable guy who counts himself lucky, very lucky. Having grown up in Maine, where, according to him, "summer usually lasts about a week," he had never concerned himself with the prospects of skin cancer. Neither did he court the sun by golfing, fishing, surfing, or doing any of the usual things identified

with chronic sunburn, so it was of little concern when he noticed a small, reddish freckle on his face seven years ago. "Nothing to it," a general practitioner had said. Even some years later when it appeared a bit angry, the dermatologist doubted its significance until a biopsy revealed it was melanoma.

"I was shocked!" Waddell says. "I had been told don't worry about it, it's probably an infection, and there was a 50-50 chance it could be basal cell carcinoma, the least dangerous form of skin cancer."

From the outset, Waddell's cancer was not considered life threatening, partly because it was so thin, and the outlook was considered very good. Today, three surgeries and one skin graft later, he has a crater-shaped scar on his cheek that is a daily reminder of the threat to his life. But he is a survivor.

"I'm vigilant about having my skin checked regularly because I know I have to be!" This is the mantra of Debbie Denton, an employee development specialist in Human

Resources. More aware than most, she has experienced probably as many as 30 or so reasonably severe sunburns in her lifetime and has a history of skin cancer in her family, most of whom, like herself, are fair-skinned and prime physiological candidates for the disease.

"When I was diagnosed with basal cell carcinoma, I wasn't really surprised, because I kind of expected it," Denton says, revealing a dime-sized, whitish scar on her left hand, about four times the size of the original lesion (a very tiny red spot).

While basal cell is the most curable form of skin cancer, she never lets her guard down and includes, at intervals, a full body check in her trips to the dermatologist.

The common thread among each of these stories? Skin cancer is scary – what

was, what might have been, what the future could hold. How much we take for granted – a bump here, a red spot there. After all, we grew up with a succession of skinned knees, cut fingers, rashes, and assorted

other assaults to the skin, so we're accustomed to ignoring most of it. This is exactly what JSC's Solar Safe campaign would like to change.

Throughout the summer months, you will see Solar Safe symbols, signs, and notices throughout the site, offering education, information, and free, rapid skin testing for all employees, using state-of-the-art

teledermatology.

Some 800,000 to 1,000,000 cases of skin cancer will be diagnosed this year in the U.S., and 7,000 people will die from melanoma. Although skin cancer is the most common of all cancers, it is the most curable if detected early. Don't ignore this fact. Did we mention that the most devastating experiences began with just a small mole or freckle? ■

Diana Ashby worked tirelessly her final years to expedite cancer research. To that end, she founded The Melanoma Research Foundation dedicated to funding research toward treatment of melanoma and support of the melanoma patient community. The MRF can be reached at 800-673-1290 or at [www.melanoma.org](http://www.melanoma.org). We also recommend [www.mpip.org](http://www.mpip.org).

**Solar Safe**  
Skin Cancer/Eye Damage Prevention Program

- Self-Exams Are Important:**
  - Skin cancer most common of all cancers
  - Affects 600,000 Americans annually—and increasing
  - Existent cancer to cure, if treated early
  - If not detected early—can result in disfigurement, even death
- Look For:**
  - Three types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, malignant melanoma
  - Look for changes of any kind
  - Don't ignore a suspicious skin spot just because it's not painful
  - Skin cancers may be painless, but are still dangerous
- Warning Signs**
  - Skin growth that increases in size
  - Appearance: pearly, translucent, tan, brown, black, or multicolored
  - A mole, birthmark, beauty mark, or any brown spot that:
    - changes color
    - increases in size or thickness
    - changes in texture
    - is irregular in outline
    - is bigger than freckles, the size of a pencil eraser
    - appears after age 21
  - Spot or sore that continues to itch, hurt, crust, scab, bleed, or bleed
  - Open sore that does not heal within three weeks
- If You Spot It... Stop It!**
  - Don't overlook or delay
  - Consult your family physician or skin specialist
- Protection**
  - Sunlight contributes to over 90% of all skin cancers
  - Practice sun-protection habits:
    - Avoid peak sunlight activities—stay indoors or in the shade
    - Use a sunscreen rated SPF 15 or higher
    - Wear sunglasses, broad-brimmed hats, and protective clothing
    - Never tan naturally or artificially

**Risk Factors**  
(Risk Factors) sun exposure (sunbathing, tanning), fair complexion, childhood sunburns/blistering, skin moles

**Early Detection**  
total body screening every 3 years to age 40, total body annually from 40 years of age

**Health Education**

Check the NASA website: <http://www.nasa.gov>

Bob Gillispie and Celeste Evans demonstrate a new teledermatology concept whereby digital photos of skin lesions are sent to a downtown dermatologist for diagnosis and recommendations.



NASA JSC Photo JSC2000-03291 by Benny Benavides



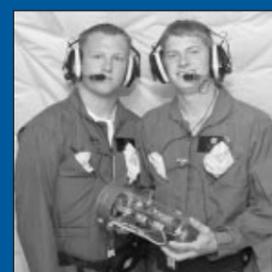
Technology companies at Expo.

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The shuttle as never seen before.

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High school experiments fly high.

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