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To Framingham 8th graders: Harvard researchers got your back

Posted October 26, 2009 09:00 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

If you're an eighth grade Framingham student, Harvard researchers are offering to watch your back – literally.

Five years ago, around 450 Framingham fifth graders were recruited to join a skin cancer prevention study which monitors changes in moles on student's backs and legs with the goal of learning how normal moles change in response to sun exposure and other variables.

Around 88 percent of those students, now sophomores in high school, continue to be monitored. And, the researchers from Harvard School of Public Health and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, are looking for at least 400 more participants from another class – this year's eighth graders – to join the multi-million dollar study funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health.

According to those in charge of the study, it is the only one of its kind in the country.

Those involved with the Study of Nevi in Children, or SONIC, said they hope to match the long-term success of [The Framingham Heart Study](#), a study on cardiovascular disease which began with one group in 1948 and has recruited three more generations of participants since leading to valuable medical findings about the disease.

"SONIC has unlimited potential," said senior research scientist at Harvard School of Public Health and project director for the study, Alan Geller. "But our focus right now is to reach our immediate goal," of recruiting 400 eight graders this fall.

One out of every five Americans get skin cancer at some point in their life and it is one of the most common forms of cancer for people between age 20 to 29, Geller said.

Researchers believe early signs of skin cancer, including its deadliest form – melanoma, can start at around the age of middle school through high school students, he said.

During that time, as they transition through puberty, the teenagers hit their peak stage of mole development. Also, skin damage from sun exposure can often begin but remain undetected during adolescence.

Geller said research shows that moles and other skin marks can be precursors to skin cancer, and, so far SONIC has found that an increased frequency in sunburns can lead to a person developing more moles.

Between 30 and 40 percent of the original group of fifth-grade students who joined the study when it began in 2004 developed at least one mole by the time they reached eighth grade, he said.

Factors for a person growing new moles include fair skin, more moles to begin

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with and sunburns. Geller said, such results are helpful in pinpointing potential causes for skin cancer that parents and children can control.

“You can’t change your skin type, but you can change behavior that leads to sunburns and mole development,” he said.

SONIC hopes to retain students they recruit through grade 11.

“The parents are often very interested in having their children screened,” said SONIC project nurse Marilyn Bishop. “But the children are not as enthusiastic.”

So, to help coax the teens on-board, the study gives each participant two movie tickets each year they participate and a flash drive.

Screenings for the study, which take about seven minutes, are done in private cubicles and are chaperoned and monitored by school nurses and SONIC staff at the time of the annual screenings for scoliosis during the school day. An overall picture of the student’s back is taken along with close-up photos, called dermoscopy, on selected moles on their back and on one leg.

Consenting students will be photographed this year and again when they are in 11th grade and students will complete surveys each year. Parents will also be asked to complete a survey this year and once their child is in grade 11.

The high-quality, digital photographs are carefully reviewed by dermatologists who look for moles and skin changes over the course of the study and compare each student’s photos with results from the surveys, which ask students and parents about various questions including about sun exposure, use of sun protection, use of tanning beds, and any family history of skin cancer.

“This is the best close-up we’ll ever see of a mole,” Geller said. “Skin cancer writes its message in the skin for all of us to see. We want to see how normal moles might transition to abnormal.”

Geller said students involved in the study so far have not had any cancerous moles. However, should anything unusual be noticed, the student and parents will be notified.

“The pictures give parents something more scientific and detailed than taking them to a pediatrician,” to get a similar screening which are often no covered by insurance and can be expensive, he said.

The study has been approved by the National Institutes of Health, Harvard University School of Public Health, the Framingham Superintendent of Schools and all the principals and nurses in the Framingham schools.

Study organizers said they need consent from students upcoming screenings by Oct. 31.

Screenings begin at Fuller Middle School on Nov. 3, at Cameron Middle School on Nov. 17, at Walsh Middle School on Jan. 13, at St. Tarcisius School on Feb. 10, at St. Bridget School on Feb. 12, and at McAuliffe Regional Middle School on Feb. 2.

Researchers also hope to get another 400 eight graders, this year’s seventh grade class, to participate next year.

For more information or to ask questions, contact Marilyn Bishop, the study’s nurse, at mbishop@framingham.k12.ma.us, or by calling at 508-620-4956, ext. 2304, or visit www.sonicresearchstudy.com.

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