

# Cancer Prevention

By Dina Martin



Jerilyn (Jeri) Harris.

Jerilyn (Jeri) Harris was given six months to live when, as a teen-ager, she was diagnosed with stage IV melanoma. “It was a bad one,” the now-retired Ukiah High School biology teacher recalls, and back then, the treatment was not nearly what it is today. Yet somehow Harris was, and is, a survivor.

She was 17 when she noticed the mole on her arm. It was black and ugly, and looked a bit like a cauliflower, and Harris wanted the unsightly thing removed. Once her family doctor looked at it, he wanted it removed, too, immediately. Within the week, Harris underwent an eight-hour surgery to remove the cancer, which had already spread to the lymph nodes in her chest and underarm. Even after the surgery, she was given only a 5 percent chance of survival.

The most serious type of skin cancer, melanoma develops in the cells that produce melanin, the pigment that gives skin its color. Although the exact cause is still unknown, exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from sunlight or tanning lamps increases the risk of developing melanoma. Other factors, such as genetic makeup, likely play a role. Harris, a sun-loving Southern Californian of English-Irish descent, had all the risk factors. Today, Harris slathers on the sunscreen, but back then it was all about baking on the beach with baby oil.

Despite the odds, Harris got out of the hospital a month later, just in time to attend her senior prom. She graduated with her class and started at UCLA that fall. She also went on to marry, have children, divorce, enjoy a stellar teaching career, become the interim director of teacher education for the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, and serve as chair of the State Teachers’ Retirement System (CalSTRS). She’s an avid gardener, and best of all, a grandmother.

“The cancer never returned,” she says. “Sometimes I think: My kids wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t lived past 17. I’m grateful for that.”

It was that early cancer scare that led Harris to participate in the California Teachers Study, a longitudinal study by the Cancer Prevention Institute of California (CPIC) and other California universities that has tracked cancer occurrence and the health of more than 133,000 female teachers.

Since its beginning in 1995, the California Teachers Study has collected data from an extensive questionnaire mailed to female CalSTRS members on lifestyle, medical history, and women's health. The questionnaire information has been linked with data from the California Cancer Registry, which has tracked all cases of cancer diagnosed in the state since 1988. The teachers have cumulatively filled out about 4.5 million pages of questions, provided around 10,000 biospecimens, and participated in approximately 3,000 interviews.

Originally focused on breast cancer, the ongoing health study may lead to important breakthroughs in the treatment and prevention of melanoma and other cancers as well. In the meantime, it is increasing the body of knowledge about how to prevent cancer.

“That California teachers are saintly is no news to those of us with kids in school here, but I hope people recognize the major contributions that teachers are making to science,” says CPIC researcher Christina Clarke, one of the leaders of the study. “By participating in the California Teachers Study over the years, these women have helped us build a world-class database for understanding the causes of cancer.”

“I’m encouraged that so much research is now being done in preventing and reducing the risks of cancer,” Harris says. “I was lucky, but no one is safe from melanoma.”

Dr. Clarke adds: “It’s women who participate in research, like Jeri, who will ultimately help us to unlock the secrets of cancer prevention so future generations can benefit.”

Cases of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, are on the increase in all age, sex and socioeconomic groups. In 2011, an estimated 70,230 cases of melanoma are anticipated nationwide, 5,475 in California. This year, 8,790 people are expected to die from it, according to the National Cancer Institute.

With melanoma and other cancers, prevention is the key. That’s the message of the Cancer Prevention Institute’s latest campaign, Get in Front, which is aimed at stopping cancer before it starts.

For more information about the California Teachers Study, visit [www.calteachersstudy.org](http://www.calteachersstudy.org).