

Why You Should Know about Melanoma



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Each year, more than 1 million Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer, the most common form of cancer. Of these, about 60,000 people will be diagnosed with melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer.

Most melanomas can be found early and treated successfully. These next few pages describe risk factors and important tips for finding melanoma early.

There are 3 main types of skin cancer. Most are either basal cell or squamous cell carcinomas. These seldom become life threatening. Melanoma is less common, but if not found early and treated right away, it can be very dangerous.

When diagnosed early, melanoma can be cured. Because of this, it's important to notice any skin changes and report them to your doctor right away.

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a cancer that begins in melanocytes. These are the cells that produce the skin coloring or protective pigment called melanin. Melanin helps protect the deeper layers of the skin from the harmful effects of the sun. When exposed to sunlight, the melanin in your skin increases, and your skin darkens.

Melanoma cells usually still produce melanin. This is why these cancers may have mixed shades of tan, brown, blue, or black.

Basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas of the skin do not commonly spread to other parts of the body. But melanoma can spread if not diagnosed and treated at an early stage. Once melanoma cells reach vital internal organs and grow, they are harder to treat and are much less likely to be cured.

Melanoma may appear in the skin without warning. It may also begin in or near a mole or other dark spot in the skin. That is why it's important to know the color, size, and location of the moles on your body, so you'll notice any changes that take place.

What causes melanoma?

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation can damage DNA, the genetic material in your cells. Sometimes this damage affects certain genes that control how and when cells grow and divide. If these genes do not work the way they should, the affected cells may form a melanoma.

Most UV radiation comes from sunlight, but some may come from artificial sources, such as tanning booths. Some of this exposure and cell damage may have happened within a few years of the start of the cancer. But much of the damage may be due to exposures that happened many years earlier. Children and young adults often get a lot of intense sun exposure that may not lead to cancer for many years.

In some families with inherited melanomas, gene changes that increase the risk of melanoma are passed from one generation to the next.

Although most moles never turn into a melanoma, some do. DNA changes can cause the cells of a mole to change into melanoma cells. But it is still not known why some moles become cancer or why having many moles or unusual moles increases a person's risk of getting melanoma.

Who is likely to get melanoma?

No one is entirely free from the risk of getting melanoma.

People who have the highest risk of melanoma have many moles, irregular moles, or large moles. Those with close blood relatives who have had melanoma or who have had melanoma before are also at high risk. This can be caused by a family lifestyle of frequent sun exposure, having fair skin, inheriting a gene mutation, or a combination of these factors. Some dermatologists recommend that those with a history of melanoma in a first-degree relative (mother, father, sister, son, etc.) have a skin exam to find out their risk of melanoma.

Other people who develop melanoma may have fair skin that burns and freckles easily, as well as naturally red or blond hair. They may have had sunburns as a child or young adult or other types of cancerous or precancerous spots on their skin at any age. Although melanoma is less common among people with darker skin who rarely get sunburned, no one is risk-free.

The risk is also higher in places where there is intense, year-round sunshine. As with most other cancers, the chance of developing melanoma increases as a person gets older.

It was once believed that dark brown or black skin prevented melanoma. When melanoma develops in people whose untanned skin color is brown, it most often starts on the palms, soles of the feet, and under the nails.

What is the difference between a melanoma and an ordinary mole?

An ordinary mole is an evenly colored brown, tan, or flesh-colored spot in the skin. It is either flat or raised. Its shape is round or oval,



Ordinary mole

and it has sharply defined borders. Moles are generally less than 6 millimeters (about 1/4 inch across). A mole may be present at birth, or it may show up later, usually in the first few decades of life. Sometimes many moles appear at about the same time, especially on areas of the skin exposed to the sun. Once a mole has fully developed, it normally stays

the same size, shape, and color for many years. Most moles fade as you get older.

Warning signs

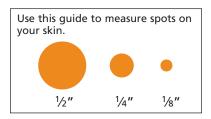
The most important warning sign is a new or changing skin growth. This could be a new growth or a change in the size, shape, or color of a spot on your skin that progresses over a month or more.



Changes in the surface of a mole

Most of us have spots on our skin. A noncancerous growth may sometimes look like a skin cancer. Almost everyone has moles and most moles are harmless. But a change in the way a mole looks is a sign that you should see your doctor. Here's the simple ABCD rule to help you remember.

- A. Asymmetry: One half of the spot does not match the other half.
- **B. Border irregularity:** Normal moles are round or oval in shape. The borders of a melanoma may be uneven or notched.
- C. Color: Common moles are usually one color throughout. Melanomas may have several colors or an irregular pattern of colors.
- D. Diameter: Common moles are generally less than 1/4 inch across (the diameter of a pencil eraser). Melanomas may be 1/8 to 1/4 inch across but are often larger.





Asymmetry



Border irregularity



Color



Diameter

But remember that although these are useful warning signs, many melanomas and other skin cancers do not have the ABCD signs.

Other warning signs of melanoma

Other warning signs may be:

- A sore that does not heal
- · The spread of pigment from the border into nearby skin
- · A change in sensation itchiness, tenderness, or pain
- A change in the surface of a mole oozing, bleeding, or the appearance of a bump or nodule
- A mole that stands out or looks really different from your other moles

How is melanoma diagnosed?

If your doctor suspects that a change in your skin is a sign of melanoma, a sample of the area is removed. This procedure is called a biopsy. It can usually be done quickly and easily in the doctor's office. The sample is then sent to a pathology laboratory to be looked at under a microscope to see if it contains cancer cells.

Can melanoma be treated?

Surgery is the best way to treat early melanomas. Later stages may need more treatment. Again, the best weapon against melanoma is finding it and removing it early.

Is there any way to prevent melanoma?

You can reduce your risk by staying out of intense sunlight. This is especially true for fair-skinned people, those with a tendency to develop many moles or unusual moles, or those who are at increased risk for any reason. Avoid unprotected sun exposure when the sun is high in the sky. Wear



protective clothing, sunglasses, and a hat. Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Remember, sunscreen doesn't provide total protection from ultraviolet (UV) rays, but it does help. For the best effect, you will need to put on sunscreen before you go out and again about every 2 hours or after swimming or sweating a lot. Indoor sunlamps and tanning beds also increase your risk of skin cancer and should not be used.

Check your skin thoroughly once a month

Get to know your skin and your own pattern of moles, freckles, and birthmarks. Be alert to changes in the number, size, shape, or color of spots on your skin. The best way to do this is to look at your skin. It may also be helpful to have someone else who can check your back. Call your doctor if you find any new or changing skin growths.

How to examine your skin

The best time to do this simple monthly exam is after a bath or shower. Use a full-length mirror and a hand mirror so you can check any moles, blemishes, or birthmarks from the top of your head to your toes. Note anything new – a new skin growth; a change in the size, shape, or color of an existing mole; or a sore that does not heal.

Face the mirror:



 Check your face, ears, neck, chest, and belly.
Use a comb or hair dryer to part your hair so that you can check your scalp. 2. Check the underarm areas, both sides of your arms, the tops and palms of your hands, in between your fingers, and your nails.

Sit down:



3. Check the front of your thighs, shins, the tops of your feet, in between your toes, and your toenails.

4. Now look at the bottom of your feet, your calves, and the backs of your thighs.



Stand up:



5. Use the hand mirror to check the buttocks, genital area, lower and upper back, and the back of your neck.

It may be helpful to look at your back in a wall mirror by using the hand mirror.



If you look at your skin regularly, you will know what is normal for you. Remember the warning signs and check with your dermatologist or other health care professional if you find something new or different.

The American Cancer Society is the nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer, through research, education, advocacy, and service.

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support.

