Eye Cancer Causes, Risk Factors, and Prevention

Risk Factors

A risk factor is anything that affects your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Learn more about the risk factors for eye cancer.

- What Are the Risk Factors for Eye Cancer?
- Do We Know What Causes Eye Cancer?

Prevention

There is no way to completely prevent eye cancer, but there may be things you can do that might lower your risk.

- Can Eye Cancer Be Prevented?

What Are the Risk Factors for Eye Cancer?

A risk factor is anything that affects your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. Some risk factors, like smoking, can be changed. Others, like a person’s age or family history, can’t be changed.

But having a known risk factor, or even several risk factors, does not mean that you will get the disease. And many people who get the disease may have few or no known risk factors.
Risk factors for eye melanoma

Race/ethnicity

The risk of intraocular melanoma is much higher in whites than in African Americans or Asian Americans.

Eye color

People with light colored eyes are somewhat more likely to develop melanoma of the eye than are people with brown eyes.

Age and gender

Eye melanomas can occur at any age, but the risk goes up as people get older. Eye melanoma is slightly more common in men than in women.

Certain inherited conditions

People with dysplastic nevus syndrome, who have many abnormal moles on the skin, are at increased risk of skin melanoma. They also seem to have a higher risk of developing melanoma of the eye.

People with abnormal brown spots on the uvea (known as oculodermal melanocytosis or nevus of Ota) also have an increased risk of developing eye melanoma.

*BAP1 cancer syndrome* is a rare inherited condition in which family members are at increased risk for eye melanoma, as well as melanoma of the skin and some other cancers. This condition is caused by an inherited mutation (change) in the BAP1 gene.

Eye melanomas can run in some families who do not have these conditions, but this is very rare.

Unproven risk factors

*Sun exposure*: Too much exposure to sunlight (or sunlamps), a known risk factor for melanoma of the skin, has also been proposed as a possible risk factor for melanoma of the eye, but this has not been proven.
Certain occupations: Some studies have suggested that welders, farmers, fishermen, chemical workers, and laundry workers may have a higher risk of eye melanoma, but none of these links has been proven conclusively.

Risk factors for eye lymphoma

The only known risk factor for primary lymphoma of the eye is having a weakened immune system. Examples include people with AIDS and people who take anti-rejection drugs after organ or tissue transplants.

- References
See all references for Eye Cancer

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Do We Know What Causes Eye Cancer?

The exact cause of most eye cancers is not known. But scientists have found that the disease is linked with some other conditions, which are described in “What are the risk factors for eye cancer?” A great deal of research is being done to learn more about the causes.

Scientists are learning how certain changes in the DNA inside cells can cause the cells to become cancerous. DNA is the chemical in each of our cells that makes up our genes, the instructions for how our cells function. We usually look like our parents because they are the source of our DNA. But DNA can also influence our risk for developing certain diseases, such as some kinds of cancer.

Some genes control when our cells grow, divide into new cells, and die. Genes that help cells grow, divide, or stay alive are called oncogenes. Genes that slow down cell division or cause cells to die at the right time are called tumor suppressor genes. Cancers can be caused by DNA changes that turn on oncogenes or turn off tumor suppressor genes.
Some people with cancer have DNA changes they inherited from a parent that increase their risk for the disease. For example, some people inherit a change (mutation) in the BAP1 tumor suppressor gene, which increases their risk of eye melanoma and some other cancers. When the BAP1 gene is mutated, it doesn’t work normally, which can allow cells with this change to grow out of control.

Most DNA changes linked to cancer are acquired during life rather than inherited before birth. For example, recent research has shown that about 4 out of 5 eye melanomas have changes in either of 2 related genes, GNA11 or GNAQ, which appear to be oncogenes. Other, as of yet unknown, gene changes are probably needed for these cancers to develop as well.

Scientists are studying these and other DNA changes to learn more about them and how they might lead to eye cancer. But it is still not exactly clear what causes these changes to occur in some people and not others.

- References

See all references for Eye Cancer

Can Eye Cancer Be Prevented?

We do not yet know what causes most cancers of the eye, so it is not yet possible to prevent them.

Eye melanoma

We know there is a link between sunlight and melanomas of the skin, and there are things you can do that might reduce your risk of these cancers, including limiting your exposure to intense sunlight, covering up with protective hats and clothing, and using sunscreen.

The American Cancer Society also recommends wearing UV-protected sunglasses
when outside in strong sunlight. Wrap-around sunglasses with 99% to 100% UVA and UVB absorption provide the best protection for the eyes and the surrounding skin. This might help reduce the risk of developing cancers of the skin around the eyes. The link between sunlight and eye melanomas is not proven, but some doctors think that sunglasses might also reduce eye melanoma risk.

**Eye lymphoma**

Many people with eye lymphoma have no clear risk factors for this disease. For now, the best way to limit the risk of eye lymphoma is to try to avoid infection with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

- References

See all references for Eye Cancer

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