

Why You Should Know About Melanoma



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There are 3 main types of skin cancer. Most are either basal cell or squamous cell cancers. These seldom become life threatening. Melanoma is a less common but more serious cancer. When found early, melanoma can be cured. You need to know about melanoma because it's important to notice skin changes and tell a health care provider about them right away.

Here we will go over risk factors and tips for finding melanoma early – while it's small and before it has spread.

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a cancer that starts in melanocytes. These are the cells that make the skin coloring called melanin. Melanin helps protect the deeper layers of the skin from the harmful effects of the sun. Sunlight causes your skin to make more melanin, and your skin gets darker.

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

Melanoma can spread to other parts of the body if not found and treated early. Once melanoma cells reach vital organs and grow, they're hard to treat and much less likely to be cured.

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

What causes melanoma?

Ultraviolet (UV) rays are a major risk factor for melanoma. Even though UV rays make up only a very small part of the sun's rays, they're the main cause of the sun's damaging effects on the skin. UV rays can damage DNA, the genetic material in your cells.

Most UV rays come from the sun, but they can also come from artificial sources, such as tanning booths.

Sometimes this damage changes the genes that control how and when cells grow and divide. If these genes don't work the way they should, the affected cells may grow out of control and form a melanoma.

Sometimes UV exposure and cell damage can lead to the start of cancer within a few years. But it's often many years before the damage causes problems. Children and young adults often get a lot of intense sun exposure that may not lead to cancer until they are much older.

Melanoma also runs in some families. In those families, gene changes that increase the risk of melanoma are passed from one generation to the next.

Who is likely to get melanoma?

No one is safe from 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 and those who have had melanoma themselves are also at higher risk. This may be due to a family lifestyle of frequent sun exposure, having fair skin, inheriting a gene mutation, or a combination of these factors. Some dermatologists (skin doctors) suggest that people who have a first-degree relative (mother, father, sister, son, etc.) with a history of melanoma should get a skin exam done and talk to a health care provider about their risk of melanoma.

People who have fair skin that burns and freckles easily, as well as naturally red or blond hair, are also at higher risk for melanoma.

People who had sunburns as a child or young adult or other types of cancer or pre-cancer spots on their skin at any age are at higher risk, too.

The chance of having melanoma goes up as a person gets older. Still, melanoma is one of the most common cancers in younger people.

Melanoma is less common in people with darker skin who rarely get sunburned, but no one is risk-free. 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.



Is there any way to prevent melanoma?

You can help reduce your risk of melanoma by limiting your time in intense sunlight. Seek shade when the sun is high in the sky. Wear protective clothing, sunglasses, and a hat. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen (which protects against different types of UV rays) with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher.

Remember, sunscreen doesn't provide total protection from UV rays, but it helps. For the best effect, you need to put on sunscreen before you go out and again about every 2 hours or after swimming or sweating a lot.

Do not use indoor sunlamps and tanning beds.

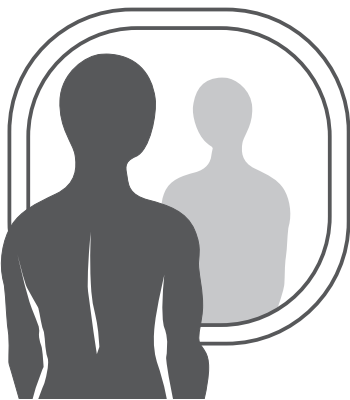
Check your skin.

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 help to have someone else check your back, scalp, and other places that may be hard to look at. See a health care provider if you find any new or changing skin growths.

How to examine your skin

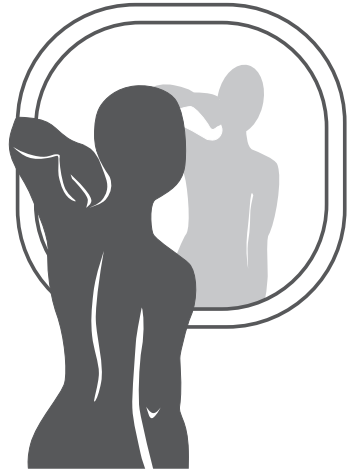
The best time to do this simple skin exam is after a bath or shower. Use a full-length mirror and a hand mirror so you can check any moles, blemishes, or birthmarks from the top of your head to your toes. Note anything new – a new skin growth; a change in the size, shape, or color of a mole; or a sore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

Face the mirror:

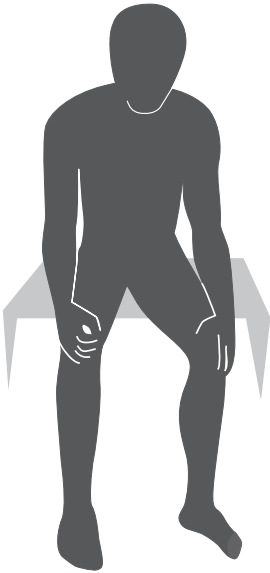


1. Check your face, ears, neck, chest, and belly. Use a comb or hair dryer to part your hair so that you can check your scalp.

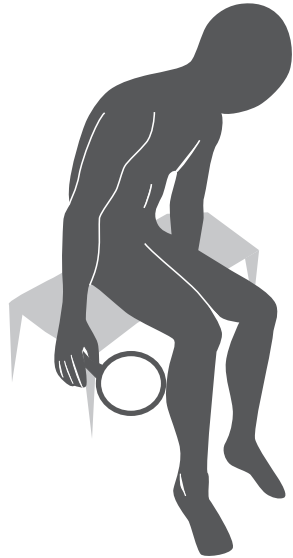
2. Check the underarm areas, both sides of your arms, the tops and palms of your hands, between your fingers, and your nails.



Sit down:



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



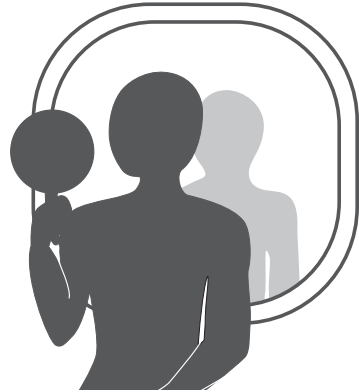
4. Use a hand mirror to look at the bottom of your feet, your calves, and the backs of your thighs.

Stand up:



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

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'll know what's normal for you. See a dermatologist (skin doctor) or other health care provider if you find anything new or different.

What does an ordinary mole look like?

An ordinary mole is an evenly colored brown, tan, or flesh-colored spot in the skin. It's either flat or raised. It may be round or oval, and it has sharply defined borders. Most moles are less than 6 millimeters (about $\frac{1}{4}$ 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 skin exposed to the sun. Once a mole has fully developed, it normally stays the same size, shape, and color. Most moles fade as you get older.



Ordinary mole



Changes in the surface
of a mole

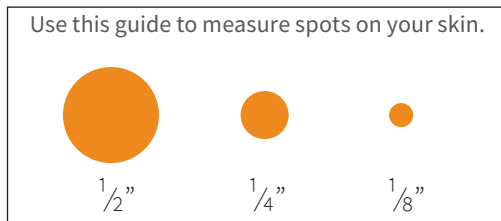
What are warning signs of melanoma?

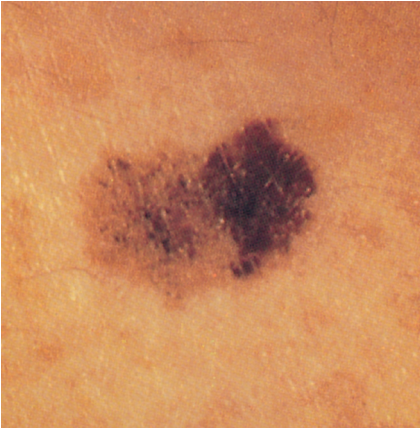
The most important warning sign of melanoma is a new or changing skin growth. This could be a new growth or spot, or a change in the size, shape, or color of a mole.

Most of us have spots on our skin. They may sometimes look like a skin cancer. Almost everyone has moles, and most moles are harmless. Still, a change in the way a mole looks is a sign that you should see a health care provider.

Here's the simple ABCD rule to help you remember what to look for:

- A. Asymmetry:** One half of the spot does not match the other half.
- B. Border:** Normal moles are round or oval in shape and have sharply defined borders. The borders of a melanoma may be uneven, blurred, or notched.
- C. Color:** Moles are usually one color throughout. Melanomas may have many colors or an irregular pattern of colors.
- D. Diameter:** Moles are most often less than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch across (the diameter of a pencil eraser). Melanomas are often larger, but they can also be smaller than this.





Asymmetry



Border irregularity



Color



Diameter

Although these are useful warning signs, some melanomas and other skin cancers do not have the ABCD signs.

Other warning signs of melanoma

Other warning signs may be:

- A sore that doesn't heal
- The spread of pigment from the border into nearby skin
- A change in the way it feels – itchiness, tenderness, or pain
- A change in the surface of a mole – oozing, bleeding, or a new bump
- A mole that stands out or looks really different from your other moles
- A brown or black streak or spot underneath a nail

How do they know if it's melanoma?

If your health care provider suspects that a change in your skin may be melanoma, a small piece of the area is removed. This procedure is called a biopsy (BY-op-see). It can usually be done in the provider's office. This sample is then sent to a lab to be checked for cancer cells.

Can melanoma be treated?

Surgery is the best way to treat early melanomas. More advanced melanomas may need other kinds of treatment. Again, the best weapon against melanoma is finding it and removing it early.

Notes



This booklet tells you more about melanoma – what it is, what causes it, and what you can do to help decrease your risk of ever having it. Anyone can get this deadly skin cancer; that’s why you need to know about it.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, visit the American Cancer Society website at **www.cancer.org** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We’re here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



bbb.org/charity

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345
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