

How to Protect yourself from Melanoma

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a kind of cancer that comes from the cells that give color to the skin. These cells are called *melanocytes*. Some melanomas arise in normal skin and others arise in pigmented skin (moles).

Melanoma is a common type of cancer. If melanoma isn't detected early, it can be fatal. Fortunately, melanoma is easy to detect. Almost all patients can be cured with minor surgery if melanoma is found early.

What causes melanoma?

Most experts agree that too much exposure to the sun is the main cause of melanoma. Melanoma is also linked to moles. Some moles may turn into melanoma.

Who gets melanoma?

Anyone can get melanoma. People at increased risk of melanoma are those with fair skin, freckles, blond or red hair, and blue or gray eyes. If you have a large *congenital nevus* (sometimes called a congenital mole or birthmark) or many large moles, you may also have an increased risk. Melanoma can run in families, so tell your me if you have a relative who has had melanoma.

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

Although it can be hard to tell the difference between a melanoma and a mole, there are some clues to look for. Normally, moles remain the same in size, shape and color. A change in the appearance of a mole may be a sign of melanoma. If you notice that a mole has changed in any way - if it grows, bleeds, becomes scaly, changes color, becomes itchy or painful - have me look at it right away.

The American Cancer Society recommends that people use the **ABCD** system to remember the warning signs of melanoma:

- **A = Asymmetry:** Is the outline of the mole irregular or asymmetrical? If one half of the mole doesn't match the other half, it is asymmetrical. This can be a sign of melanoma.
- **B = Border:** Are the edges, or border, of the mole uneven? Irregular edges may be a sign of melanoma.
- **C = Color:** Is the mole varied in color? A melanoma is usually not uniform in color. There may be shades of tan, brown and black present in a melanoma. Red, white and blue may also be seen.
- **D = Diameter:** Is the diameter of the mole larger than normal (more than the size of a pencil eraser)? An increase in the size of a mole may be a sign of melanoma.

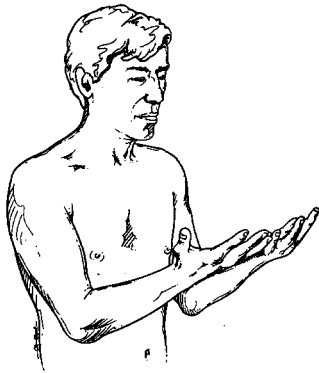
See me if you can answer yes to any of the questions above. I may be able to tell if the mole is melanoma by looking at it, but sometimes I may need to obtain a biopsy of the lesion. To obtain a biopsy, I may cut out some tissue from part of the mole or may remove the entire mole. The tissue that is removed is then examined under a microscope to see if cancer is present.

Can anything be done to prevent melanoma?

Yes. First, avoid prolonged exposure to strong sunlight and do not use tanning booths. Use a sunscreen lotion regularly when you are going to be in the sun. Wear clothes that cover you, such as a broad-brimmed hat and shirts with long sleeves. Children are at high risk of sunburn, so make sure they are protected with sunscreen when they play outdoors.

Become familiar with the moles on your body so you will know if they change. Regularly examine your skin in the seven steps shown on the following page. If you have many moles, you may want to take a photograph of your skin (with a ruler in the photograph) every 6 months or so to monitor the moles. Most important, if you are worried about a mole, see me right away. Early treatment of melanoma is simple and can save your life.

How to Examine Your Skin



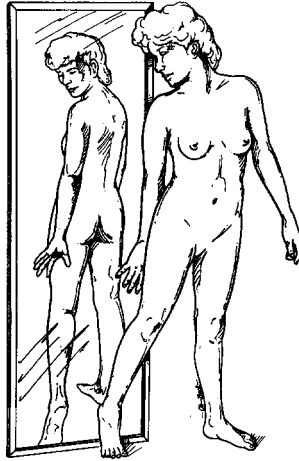
Step 1

After a bath or shower, in a well-lighted room, look at both sides of your hands, your lower arms and your upper arms.



Step 2

Stand before a large mirror and look at the front of your whole body and under your arms.



Step 3

Stand before a large mirror and look at the back of your whole body. You should be looking for anything new—a change in a mole or a new mole.



Step 4

Use a hand mirror to look at the top of your head. Move your hair away from your scalp so you can see your skin better.



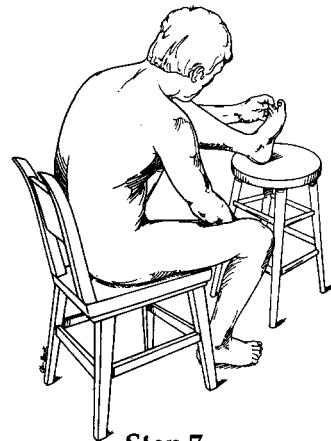
Step 5

While sitting down, use a hand mirror to look closely at the backs of your legs.



Step 6

Look at the bottoms of your feet with the hand mirror.



Step 7

Look carefully at the skin between your toes.