

Melanoma: What is melanoma?

- *Melanoma* is the most serious cancer of the skin. In some parts of the world, especially among Western countries, the number of people who develop melanoma is increasing faster than any other cancer. In the United States, for example, the incidence rate of melanoma has more than doubled in the past 20 years. **The amount of time spent unprotected in the sun directly affects your risk of skin cancer.**

Melanoma is a disease of the skin in which cancer cells are found in the melanocytes, the cells that produce color in the skin or pigment known as melanin. Melanoma usually occurs in adults, but it may occasionally be found in children and adolescents. Melanoma may also be called cutaneous melanoma or malignant melanoma. Melanoma is the rarest, but most virulent, form of skin cancer.

Melanoma is a more serious type of cancer than the more common basal cell cancer, or squamous cell cancer. Although the incidence of melanoma is lower than other types of skin cancer, it has the highest death rate and is responsible for 79 percent of all deaths from skin cancer.

Where is melanoma most often found?

Melanoma most often appears on fair-skinned men and women, but people with other skin types can be affected. Rarely, melanomas can form in parts of the body not covered by skin such as the eyes, mouth, vagina, large intestine, and other internal organs.

What are the risk factors for melanoma?

Persons with the following characteristics may be at an increased risk for melanoma:

- blond or red hair
- blue eyes
- fair complexion
- family history of melanoma
- a changed or changing mole
- many ordinary moles (more than 50)
- many freckles
- an immunosuppressive disorder
- dysplastic nevi
- **sun exposure. The amount of time spent unprotected in the sun directly affects your risk of skin cancer.**
- inability to tan

Dark-brown or black skin is not a guarantee against melanoma. African-Americans can develop this cancer, especially on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, under nails, or in the mouth.

What are the symptoms of melanoma?

The following are the most common symptoms of melanoma. However, each individual may experience symptoms differently. Symptoms may include:

- change in the size, shape, or color of a mole
- oozing or bleeding from a mole
- a mole that feels itchy, hard, lumpy, swollen, or tender to the touch

Because most malignant melanoma cells still produce melanin, melanoma tumors are often shaded brown or black. Melanoma can also appear on the body as a new mole. Men most often develop melanoma on the area of the body between the shoulders and hips, or on the head or neck. Women most often develop melanoma on the arms and legs. However, melanoma can spread quickly to other parts of the body through the lymph system, or through the blood. Like most cancers, melanoma is best treated when it is diagnosed early.

The symptoms of melanoma may resemble other conditions or medical problems. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

Distinguishing benign moles from melanoma:

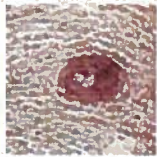
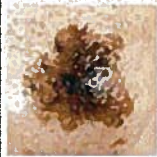






To prevent melanoma, it is important to examine your skin on a regular basis, and become familiar with moles, and other skin conditions, in order to better identify changes. According to recent research, certain moles are at a higher risk for changing into malignant melanoma. Moles that are present at birth, and atypical moles, have a greater chance of becoming malignant. Recognizing changes in moles, by following this **ABCD Chart**, is crucial in detecting malignant melanoma at its earliest stage. The warning signs are

Asymmetry: half of the mole does not match the other half

Border: the border (edges) of the mole are ragged or irregular

Color: the color of the mole varies throughout

Diameter: moles with a diameter larger than a pencil's eraser

Normal Mole	Melanoma	Sign	Characteristic
		Assymetry	Half the mole does not match the other half
		Border	The border (edges) of the mole are ragged or irregular
		Color	The color of the mole varies throughout
		Diameter	The mole's diameter is larger than a pencil's eraser

Photograph Used by Permission: National Cancer Institute

Melanomas vary greatly in appearance. Some melanomas may show all of the ABCD characteristics, while other may only show changes in one or two characteristics. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

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