

MAY 2013 • MEMBERS

Skin Cancer Malignant Melanoma

Malignant melanoma—a serious type of skin cancer

Melanocytes are skin cells that are responsible for skin color. Cancer in these cells is called malignant melanoma, or melanoma for short. Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. It spreads more often to other areas of the body and is less curable.

Who gets melanoma?

Anyone can get melanoma—men, women, and children of any age, race, or ethnicity. These people are at higher risk:

- Those who have had melanoma before
- Those who have close relatives with melanoma
- Those who have unusual-looking moles
- Those who have >50 moles on their body
- Those who have been sunburned more than once, especially as a child or teenager
- Those who have fair skin, ie, those who freckle or sunburn easily
- Those with natural blond or red hair and light-colored eyes
- Those who use tanning booths
- Those with HIV, an organ transplant, or other cause of a weakened immune system

What does melanoma look like?

The ABCDEs of melanoma are warning signs. If you see them, be sure to have a dermatologist, a doctor who specializes in skin disease, look at you right away.



Other types of skin cancer

Skin cancer is a broad term that includes several types of skin cancer. The 3 main types are malignant melanoma, basal cell carcinoma, and squamous cell carcinoma. These skin cancers are named for the type of cell the cancer comes from. So basal cell carcinoma comes from basal cells, and squamous cell carcinoma comes from squamous cells.

Unlike melanoma, basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers don't often spread to other areas of the body. They are highly curable when treated early.

the **ABCDEs** of melanoma

A  **Asymmetry**
One half does not match the other half

D  **Diameter**
Greater than 6 millimeters

B  **Border Irregularity**
The edges are notched or ragged

E  **Evolving**
Change in size, shape, or shade of color

C  **Color**
Varied shades of tan, black and brown



Early detection of melanoma

As with other types of cancer, it's important to detect melanoma early. Your chance of survival is 98% if it's detected and treated at an early stage. But if it has spread to other parts of your body by the time it is diagnosed, your chance of survival could be as low as 15%. So it's important that you:

- Look at your skin on a regular basis to see if there are any changes.
 - Look for new spots or moles.
 - Look for changes in size, shape, or color.
- Look for the ABCDE warning signs.
- See your doctor right away if you notice anything suspicious.

Remember to look all over your body, not just areas exposed to the sun. Melanoma can occur anywhere from the top of your scalp to the bottom of your feet.

Diagnosing melanoma

Once a suspicious area has been found, it's important to find out if it is cancer and, if so, what kind. To do that, doctors remove the spot or mole and send it to a laboratory for analysis. Quest Diagnostics laboratory uses doctors who are specially trained to find out if the growth is cancer and what kind it is.

Treating melanoma

Surgery, that is, removal of the spot or mole, is the main treatment. Your doctor will let you know if more treatment is needed. Doctors sometimes use radiation therapy or a medicine that is put on the skin. Sometimes the doctor will take a biopsy of a nearby lymph node to see if the cancer has spread to the lymph system. If it has spread, the doctor might surgically remove the lymph node. He/she might also treat the person with immunotherapy, chemotherapy, and/or radiation therapy.

How to prevent skin cancer

Here are some things you can do to protect yourself from skin cancer:

- Use sunscreen when outdoors.
 - Broad spectrum—protects against both UVA and UVB rays
 - SPF 30 or higher
 - Reapply every 2 hours, more often if in and out of water or sweating.
- Stay in the shade, especially between 10 AM and 2 PM.
- Wear protective, tightly woven clothes.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses.
- Avoid sunbathing and tanning booths.

But remember that you need some exposure to the sun so your body will make vitamin D. About 10 minutes a day will do it. This small amount should be safe for most people.

Additional information

- American Cancer Society: <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/skincancer-melanoma/index>
- PubMed Health: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001853/>
- Skin Cancer Foundation: <http://www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-information/melanoma>

References

1. American Cancer Society. Cancer Facts and Figures 2013. <http://www.cancer.org/research/cancerfactsfigures/index>. Accessed March 8, 2013.