PURDUE UNIVERSITY
Extension - Health and Human Sciences

Melanoma: Vital Facts You Should Know

Fact Sheet
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Did you know that cancer of the skin is by far the most common of all cancers? Melanoma accounts for only about 1% of skin cancers, but it causes a large majority of skin cancer deaths.

In 2023, an estimated 97,610 adults (58,120 men and 39,490 women) in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive melanoma of the skin.

What is your sun safety IQ?

1.True or False? I can't get skin cancer because my normal routine (such as drive to work, hobbies, and vacations) do not include a lot of time outdoors.

2.**True or False?** I should use sunscreen at sporting activities and games, even though I only go (and get burned) once or twice a year.

3.**True or False?** If I'm wearing sunscreen, I can stay in the sun as long as I want.

4.**True or False?** A sunscreen labeled SPF 15 blocks more UV radiation than one labeled SPF 30.

5.How often should you reapply water-resistant sunscreen?

6.**True or False?** Getting a "base tan" at an indoor tanning salon prevents sunburn when going to the beach.

1) F 2) T 3) F 4) F 5) every 2 hours or sooner 6) F

How common is it? The rates of melanoma have been rising over the past few decades. In adults ages 50 and older, rates continue to increase. Melanoma mortality rates did decline over the past decade, due to advances in treatment.

What is the risk of getting it? Your risk increases as you age. The average age of people when it is diagnosed is 65. However, melanoma is not uncommon among those younger than 30. In fact, melanoma is one of the most common cancers in young female adults.

What are the risk factors? A risk factor is anything that raises the chance of getting a disease, such as skin cancer. Having a risk factor, or even multiple risk factors does not mean that you will get the disease. However, it is still important to know about the risk factors because there may be things that you can do to lower your risk.

- Ultraviolet (UV) light exposure - This is a major risk factor for most melanomas. Sunlight is the main source of UV rays. Tanning beds and sun lamps are also sources of UV rays. UV rays damage the DNA inside skin cells.
- Moles (also called nevus) - These are benign or non-cancerous pigmented tumors. Most moles will never cause problems, but someone who has many moles is more likely to develop melanoma. If you are someone who has many irregular or large moles, you should talk with your physician.
- Fair skin, freckling, and light hair - The risk for melanoma increases for those who have red or blond hair, blue or green eyes, are fair skinned and those who have freckles and burn easy.
- Family history - Your risk of melanoma increase if one or more of your first-degree relatives (parents, brothers, sisters, or children) have had skin cancer. Around 10% of all people with melanoma have a family history of the disease. Talk with your physician about regular skin exams, how to examine your own skin, and how to avoid UV rays if you have a family history.
- Weak immune system - A person's immune system helps fight cancers of the skin and other organs. People with weakened immune systems are more likely to develop melanoma. For example, people who get organ transplants are usually given medicines that weaken their immune system to help prevent them from rejecting the new organ. This increases their risk of melanoma.
- Age and gender - Melanoma is more likely to occur in older people. In the United States, men have a higher rate of melanoma than woman. Before age 50, the risk is higher for women; after age 50 the risk is higher for men.

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Fact Sheet

What causes skin cancer?

What causes melanoma skin cancer? There are many risk factors that have been found, but it is not always clear exactly how they might cause cancer in someone. For example, while most moles never turn into a melanoma, some do. Researchers have found some gene changes inside mole cells that may cause them to become melanoma cells. But it's still not known exactly why some moles become cancerous while most don't.

What steps can be taken to prevent it? There is no sure way to prevent melanoma. However, there are things you can do that could lower your risk of getting it, as well as other skin cancers.

- Limit your UV exposure! Simply staying in the shade in one of the best ways to limit your UV exposure. However, if you are going to be in the sun, be sure to slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, slap on a hat, and wrap on sunglasses to protect your eyes and sensitive skin around them.
- Avoid tanning beds and sunlamps! Tanning bed usage has been linked with an increased risk of melanoma, especially if the use started before age 30.
- Watch your moles! Checking your skin regularly may help you spot any new or abnormal moles or other growths and show them to your doctor before they even have a chance to turn into skin cancer.

What does early detection and diagnoses look like? Melanoma can often be found early, when it is most likely to be cured. Some people have a high risk of getting it than others. It is important to know hat ANYONE can get it.

Know your own skin! It is important to understand the pattern of moles, blemishes, freckles, and other marks on your skin. This will help you notice any new changes. It is recommended that you check your skin once every month. You can conduct a self-exam by going into a well-lit room in front of a full-length mirror. Use a hand-held mirror to help look at areas that are hard to see, such as the backs of your thighs. Examine all areas, including your palms and soles, scalp, ears, nails, and your back (in men, the back is a common place for melanomas to start). Friends and family members can also help you with these exams, especially for those hard-to-see areas, such as your scalp and back.

What should you do if you find something suspicious on your skin? If you're looking at your skin (during a skin-self exam or at any other time) and see anything that concerns you, especially something that has just appeared or has changed recently, be sure to have it checked by a doctor. If you can't see the doctor right away, you might want to take good close-up photos of the area so your doctor can see if the area is changing when you do get an appointment.

Usually the doctor's first step is to ask about your symptoms, such as when the mark first appeared, if it has changed in appearance, and if it's painful, itchy, or bleeding. You might also be asked about past exposures to causes of skin cancer (including sunburns and tanning practices) and if you or anyone in your family has had skin cancer. The doctor will then examine your skin, noting the size, shape, color, and texture of the area in question, and if it is bleeding, oozing, or crusting. The rest of your body may be checked for moles and other spots that could be related to skin cancer.

If you're being seen by your primary doctor and skin cancer is suspected, you may be referred to a dermatologist, a doctor who specializes in skin diseases, who might use special tools to look at the area more closely.

If the doctor thinks that a suspicious area might be skin cancer, a sample of skin from that area will be removed and looked at under a microscope. This is called a skin biopsy. There are many ways to do a skin biopsy. The doctor will choose one based on the suspected type of skin cancer, where it is on your body, the size of the affected area, and other factors.

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Resource: American Cancer Society