



What You Should Know About Skin Cancer

Prevention and Early Detection



**American
Cancer
Society®**

Every cancer. Every life.™

Learning about skin cancer – what it is and what causes it – can help you lower your risk of ever having it. Anyone can get skin cancer – no matter how dark or light their skin is.

This booklet will help you learn about how to protect your skin and prevent skin cancer. And skin cancer is easier to treat when found early, so it's important to know common signs and symptoms to look out for.

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer. Anyone of any skin tone can get skin cancer. It is also one of the easiest cancers to prevent or find early.

The most common types of skin cancer are:

- Basal cell carcinoma
- Squamous cell carcinoma
- Melanoma

What causes skin cancer?

Ultraviolet (UV) rays are the most common cause of skin cancer. UV rays can damage skin cells and increase the risk of cancer.

Most of our exposure to UV rays comes from the sun. Tanning booths and sun lamps also expose you to UV rays and should be avoided.

Damage to the skin may not lead to skin cancer for many years. That's why it's important to start protecting children, teens, and young adults from sun damage at an early age. People whose skin gets damaged when they're young might not get skin cancer until they are much older.

What is basal cell carcinoma?

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) is the most common type of skin cancer.

Basal cell skin cancers usually grow slowly. They most often start on sun-exposed areas like the face, head, and neck.

These cancers most often appear as:

- Flat, firm, pale or yellow areas, similar to a scar
- Raised, reddish patches that might be itchy
- Small pink, or red, shiny bumps, which might have blue, brown, or black areas
- Open sores (which might have oozing or crusted areas) that don't heal, or that heal and then come back
- Areas that bleed easily after shaving or a minor injury

Tell your health care provider if you notice any new or changing skin areas like these.

Basal cell cancers can often be cured when found and treated early. These cancers don't usually spread to other parts of the body. But if not treated, over time they can grow into nearby areas, such as lymph nodes, bones, or other tissues under the skin.

What is squamous cell carcinoma?

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is the second most common type of skin cancer.

Squamous cell skin cancers usually grow on sun-exposed areas like the face, ears, neck, lips, and backs of hands. They can also start in the skin of the genital area.

Squamous cell skin cancers can also develop in scars, skin sores, or from certain precancerous conditions (such as actinic keratoses and keratoacanthomas).

These cancers most often appear as:

- Rough or scaly red patches, which might crust or bleed
- Raised growths or lumps
- Open sores (which may have oozing or crusted areas) that don't heal, or that heal and then come back
- Wart-like growths

Tell your health care provider if you notice any new or changing skin areas like these.

Squamous cell carcinomas usually grow slowly. They can often be cured when found and treated early. If not treated, squamous cell carcinomas can grow deeper into the skin or spread to other parts of the body.

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a skin cancer that starts in cells called melanocytes. Melanocytes make melanin, which gives our skin its tan or brown color. Sunlight increases melanin and darkens or tans the skin.

Melanoma is less common but more serious than basal and squamous cell skin cancers. It can spread to other parts of the body if not found and treated early. When found early, melanoma can often be treated successfully. It is harder to treat once it has spread to other organs.

Melanoma can develop anywhere on the skin, but it is more likely to start in areas like the chest, back, legs, neck, and face. Melanoma can also form in other parts of the body, such as the eyes, mouth, genitals, or anal area, but these are much less common.

Is it a mole or melanoma?

Both moles and melanomas most often appear as dark areas on the skin, but there are some important differences between them.

Moles are common, and most of them will never cause any problems.

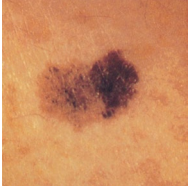
Normal moles are usually round or oval shaped, evenly colored (usually brown or tan), and tend to have sharply defined borders. They're usually small (less than the width of a pencil eraser), although some can be bigger.

A mole may be present at birth, or it may show up later. Sometimes many moles appear at about the same time, especially on skin exposed to the sun.

Once a mole appears, it normally stays the same size, shape, and color. Most moles fade as you get older.

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

The **ABCDE** rule can help you remember what to look for:



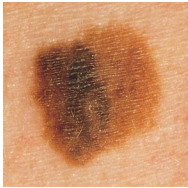
A.

Asymmetry. One half of the spot does not match the other half.



B.

Border. Normal moles are round or oval and have well-defined borders (edges). Look for borders that are uneven or blurry.



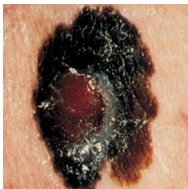
C.

Color. Moles are usually the same color throughout. Melanomas may have many colors or may change color.



D.

Diameter. Moles are often less than 6mm or ¼ inch across (the width of a pencil eraser). Melanomas are often larger, but they can also be smaller.



E.

Evolving. Look for any changes in size, shape, or color.

Not all melanomas fit these rules, so be sure to tell your health care provider about any changes or new spots on your skin, or growths that look different from the rest of your moles.

Who is at risk for skin cancer?

Anyone can get skin cancer, no matter how light or dark their skin is. However, there are things that increase the risk of getting skin cancer:

- Having light-colored skin that burns or freckles easily
- Having naturally red or blond hair
- Having many sunburns as a child or young adult
- Having many irregular or large moles
- Having close blood relatives who've had melanoma
- Using indoor tanning
- Having had skin cancer before
- Having precancerous skin spots
- Having a weak immune system
- Being older

Can people of color get skin cancer?

Even though the risk for getting skin cancer is higher in people with lighter skin, **skin cancer can happen to people of any skin color.**

When people of color get skin cancer, it is more likely to have spread by the time it's found. This makes it harder to treat.



Melanoma isn't common in people with darker skin, but when it does occur, it is more likely to be in areas that have little or no sun exposure:

- Palms of the hands
- Soles of the feet
- Under the nails

How can I reduce my risk of skin cancer?

Practicing sun safety is one of the most important things you can do to lower your risk of skin cancer.

- Limit your time in the sun.** Stay in the shade when possible, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest.
- Wear protective clothing,** sunglasses that have UV protection, and a hat. While all clothing provides some UV protection, some clothes are made specially to help block UV rays.
- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen** with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 on exposed areas of skin year round.
- Reapply sunscreen every two hours** or after swimming or sweating, even if it's labeled as "waterproof."
- Avoid tanning beds** and sun lamps.

Stay away from tanning pills, shots, nasal sprays, and lotions that claim to provide a way to tan without the risk from UV rays. These products are not approved by the FDA for tanning and may be harmful to your health.

These products are different from bronzers and sunless tanners, which are applied directly to the skin and are considered cosmetics. Bronzers and sunless tanners are not thought to be harmful when used properly.



Find skin cancer early

The best way to catch skin cancer early is to check your skin for changes.

Many health care providers recommend checking your skin about once a month, especially if you have one or more risk factors that increase your chance of getting skin cancer.

How do I check my skin?

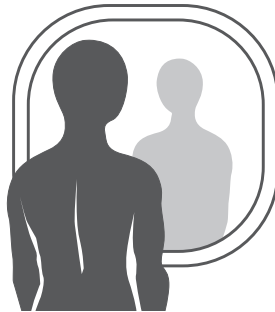
When you check your skin for the first time, make sure to check everywhere and note any moles, freckles, or other marks on your skin. Write notes or take photos to compare to in the future. Tell your health care provider about any changes as soon as possible.

If it's hard for you to move and see all these areas, you can ask a family member, friend, or a doctor to help check your skin.

Face the mirror

1.

Check your face, ears, neck, chest, and belly. Lift breast tissue or belly if needed to check under these areas.



2.

Check the underarm areas, both sides of your arms, the tops and palms of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails (without nail polish).

Sit down

3.

Check the front of your thighs, shins, the tops of your feet, between your toes, and under your toenails (without nail polish).



4.

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

Stand up

5.

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



6.

It may be helpful to look at your back in a wall mirror by using a hand mirror.

Use a comb or hair dryer to part your hair so that you can check your scalp.

What should I do if I find something suspicious?

Not all skin changes are cancer. It's important to note these changes and have them checked by a doctor. If you find a new or changing area on your skin:

- Draw a circle around the area with a pen or marker.
- Take a photo of the area.
- Make an appointment to have a doctor look at it. The only way to know if it is skin cancer is to have it checked.

How do they know if it's skin cancer?

If your health care provider is worried that a change in your skin may be cancer, the area (or a small piece of it) will be removed. This procedure is called a biopsy. It can usually be done in the provider's office. The sample is then sent to a lab and checked for cancer cells.

For small skin cancers, a biopsy might remove all the cancer cells and no more treatment is needed. If the biopsy does not remove all the cancer, more treatment or tests might be needed.



This booklet tells you some things about skin cancer, including:

- What skin cancer is
- The most common types
- What causes skin cancer
- What you can do to help lower your risk
- How to spot skin cancer early and what to do if you find something

Anyone of any skin color can get skin cancer; that's why you need to know about it.

To learn more about skin cancer, visit the American Cancer Society website at **[cancer.org /sunsafety](https://cancer.org/sunsafety)** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.