

Examining Your Skin

» An Important Step in Melanoma Cure

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. The most serious type of skin cancer is called melanoma — and it is becoming more common every year. In fact, the percentage of people who develop melanoma has more than doubled in the past 30 years.

The good news is that melanoma can be cured if recognized and treated early. If not, the cancer can spread to other parts of the body, becoming hard to treat and even fatal. If you are suspicious about any mark on your skin, schedule a visit with your nurse practitioner.

About the Skin

Melanoma begins in skin cells called melanocytes. These cells produce melanin, which is the pigment that gives skin its color. Clusters of these cells combine with surrounding tissue to form moles, which are common and are not cancerous.

Melanocytes usually grow and divide, but sometimes this does not happen as it should. In these cases, melanocytes can become malignant, which means they are cancerous.

Risk Factors

No one knows the exact causes of melanoma, but some risk factors have been identified. These include the following:

- dysplastic nevi, which are abnormal moles that are more likely to become cancerous
- the presence of more than 50 ordinary moles on your body
- fair skin that burns or freckles easily
- personal history or family history of melanoma
- a weakened immune system
- at least one severe, blistering sunburn as a child or teenager

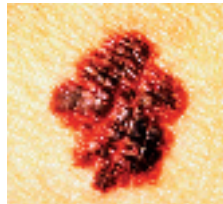
Keep in mind that some people who develop melanoma have no known risk factors.



Asymmetry



Color



Border



Diameter

Signs

The first sign of melanoma is usually a change in an existing mole. The ABCD rule (see photos) can help identify changes that might signal melanoma.

- Asymmetry — one half does not match the other
- Border — edges are irregular, ragged, notched or blurred
- Color — the color is uneven
- Diameter — a change in size, usually an increase, occurs; the melanoma is usually larger than the size of a pencil eraser.

Examining Your Skin

It is a good idea to regularly examine your skin. The best time for an exam is after a shower or bath. Use a full-length mirror and a hand-held mirror, and perform it in a brightly lit room.

Check for anything new on your skin, such as a new mole that looks abnormal, a mole that has changed, or a sore that does not heal.

Examine your skin from head to toe, and use full-length and hand-held mirrors to check areas such as your back, between the buttocks, around your fingernails and toenails, and the genital area.

Also, use a comb or blow dryer to move hair so that you can check your entire scalp; you may want to get help with this part.

Reducing Your Risk

Here are some tips to prevent skin cancer:

- Avoid the sun during the hours when it is strongest — between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Try to wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants and a wide-brimmed hat when you are outside during the day.
- Use sunscreen. Apply it before you go outdoors, and reapply it after swimming, drying yourself with a towel or sweating.
- Wear sunglasses that block at least 99% of UVA and UVB radiation to protect your eyes and skin around the eyes. **NP**

Some information is from the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov).

Additional Notes:
