

Malignant Melanoma

Malignant melanoma is a less common but highly dangerous form of skin cancer. When found at an early stage, melanoma has one of the highest cure rates of all cancers at more than 90 per cent. If left untreated, melanoma starts to invade into the skin. When it reaches the blood stream or the lymphatic system, it has a chance to spread to other parts of the body and often causes death.

What does it look like?

Melanoma can start as a new, brown or black, flat, freckle-like spot on the skin's outer surface. It can also begin as a change in the shape or colour of an existing mole or coloured spot. Melanomas tend to be dark in colour - browns and blacks - although some are a mixture of colours including red, blue and white. These tumours grow, so look for a change in the size of a spot. The key is to look for changes.

What causes it?

While the full answer still has not been unravelled, what is sure is that excessive sun exposure plays a leading role in the development of this type of skin cancer. Severe, blistering sunburns especially in childhood are thought to play an initiating role. However, recent research shows that sunburns at any time during life can also increase the risk.

Who is at highest risk?

While anybody can get melanoma, fair skinned people who have sun-sensitive skin that burns rather than tans are more likely to get this disease. People with freckles and red hair fall into this group, as do some blonds and those with blue or green eyes. Those with many moles (more than 50), or moles with an unusual colour or shape, or with large moles, have an elevated risk. A close family history of melanoma is another risk factor. Anyone with one or more of these risk factors should have a spot check by a dermatologist - it could prove to be a life-saving visit. People with no risk factors at all may still get melanoma.

Where does it often appear?

It appears most commonly on the backs of men and legs of women. However, it can appear anywhere on the skin surface. While less common in darker skinned people, melanoma usually appears on the palms of hands, soles of feet and nail beds in these people.

How long does it take to develop?

Melanoma can develop within weeks or months or it can be slow growing over several years.

Is there any way to prevent the disease?

Protect young children from the sun. Avoid the sun from 10 am to 4 pm and protect yourself if outside during these times by seeking shade, covering up with clothing and wide brimmed hats. Wear a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a minimum SPF of 15. Apply before you leave the house and reapply regularly, especially during strenuous exercise. Look for the Canadian Dermatology Association logo on sunscreen products to ensure these are safe and effective.