

PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

Melanoma and Ways to Prevent It

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Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that arises from melanocytes, the pigment-producing cells in the skin. It is the most dangerous form of skin cancer, which can spread to other parts of the body and cause serious health problems. In this handout, we explain what melanoma is, how to prevent it, and what to do if you think you may have it.

WHAT IS MELANOMA?

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that develops in the cells that produce pigment in the skin.² It can occur anywhere on the body but is most commonly found on the face, neck, arms, and legs.¹ Melanoma happens to those exposed to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or tanning beds. It can also occur due to genetic factors, such as having a family history of the disease.

Melanoma can be a severe condition if it is not caught early. If it spreads to other body parts, it can be challenging to treat and even be life-threatening. If melanoma is caught early enough, however, it is often curable with surgery.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF MELANOMA?

Melanoma usually appears as a new or changing mole on the skin. It may be black or brown, but it could also be pink, red, or white. Melanoma lesions can be small, but some can grow out to be as large as a pencil eraser and may be irregularly shaped or off-color. Other signs of melanoma are:³

- A mole that changes in size, shape, or color;
- A mole that itches or bleeds;
- A spot on the skin that looks like a bruise but does not go away; or
- A dark streak under a fingernail or toenail.

If you notice any of these symptoms, it's important to see your primary care physician (PCP) as soon as possible. Your PCP can examine the mole and determine whether it is cancerous.

SOURCE(S):

[National Institutes of Health: National Cancer Institute - 2011]



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HOW CAN MELANOMA BE PREVENTED?

Protecting your skin from the sun's harmful UV rays is the best way to prevent melanoma. Here are some tips for sun safety:⁵

- **Wear protective clothing:** When you are outside, wear clothing that covers your arms and legs. Choose clothing made from lightweight fabrics that will keep you cool and protect you from the sun. You can also wear a wide-brimmed hat to shade your face and neck.
- **Use sunscreen:** Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30. Apply it to all exposed skin, including your face, neck, and ears. Reapply sunscreen every 2 hours or more often if you are swimming or sweating.
- **Seek shade:** When possible, seek shade when the sun's rays are strongest, typically between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- **Avoid tanning beds:** Tanning beds emit UV radiation, which can damage the skin and increase your risk of melanoma.
- **Check your skin:** Regularly examine your skin for any new or changing moles or spots. If you notice anything unusual, see your PCP right away.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE MELANOMA?

If you notice any new or changing moles on your skin or any other symptoms of melanoma, it is essential to see your PCP as soon as possible. Your PCP will be able to examine the mole with a dermatoscope and may perform a biopsy to determine whether it is cancerous. If it is found to be cancerous, they will work with you to develop a treatment plan. If you notice a mole, spot, or lesion you did not think was there before, schedule an exam with your PCP as soon as possible.

The most common treatment for melanoma is surgery to remove the cancerous mole and some of the surrounding tissue. If the melanoma has spread to other parts of the body, however, additional treatments such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy may be necessary.⁴

In conclusion, melanoma is a severe type of skin cancer that you can prevent through sun safety practices such as wearing protective clothing, applying sunscreen, seeking shade, avoiding tanning beds, and regularly checking your skin for unusual moles or spots. If you notice any symptoms of melanoma, it is vital to see your PCP as soon as possible for evaluation and treatment.

Melanoma is often curable with early detection and proper treatment, but prevention is always the best option. Protecting your skin from the sun's harmful UV rays can significantly reduce your risk of developing this dangerous disease.

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