

What is melanoma?

Melanoma occurs when abnormal cells in the skin grow in an uncontrolled way.

The skin is the body's largest organ. It is made up of two main layers: the epidermis or outer layer, and the dermis or inner layer.¹

What are the different types of melanoma?

Melanoma is a cancer of cells called melanocytes in the skin. These are the cells that give skin its colour.

Melanoma can develop on the skin (cutaneous melanoma), on mucous membranes (such as the lips) or in the eye (intra-ocular or ocular melanoma).¹

What are the symptoms of melanoma?

The most common symptoms of melanoma are:

- ▶ changes in size, shape or colour of an existing mole¹
- ▶ development of a mole with irregular edges or borders¹
- ▶ development of a mole that is more than one colour¹
- ▶ a mole that itches¹
- ▶ a change in pigmented skin¹
- ▶ a new mole that grows near an existing mole – this is called a satellite mole.¹

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms, not just melanoma. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for melanoma?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as melanoma. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a person will develop melanoma. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop melanoma, while others with melanoma may have had no known risk factors. Even if a person with melanoma has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of their disease.

While the causes of melanoma are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. These factors include:

- ▶ a history of melanoma or other skin cancer²
- ▶ having several large or many small moles (called naevae) on the skin (melanocytic naevi)²
- ▶ having a fair complexion, including light-coloured, blond or red, hair, light coloured eyes and/or fair skin that freckles easily.^{1,2}
- ▶ exposure to the sun and other sources of ultraviolet radiation such as sunbeds²
- ▶ a family history of melanoma.²

How is melanoma diagnosed?

A number of tests will be performed to investigate symptoms of melanoma and confirm a diagnosis. Some of the more common tests include:

- ▶ examination of the skin to check moles, birthmarks and other skin pigmentations, which may include:
 - dermoscopy – viewing the skin through a hand-held magnifying device²
 - sequential digital imaging – involves taking a series of images of a mole over a period of time to detect changes²
- ▶ removing the mole or abnormal area of skin for examination under a microscope (biopsy or excision).²

Treatment options

Treatment and care of people with cancer is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team.

Treatment for melanoma depends on the stage of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the person's general health. Treatment usually involves surgery to remove the melanoma. Sometimes radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy may also be used.²

Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some people may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating melanoma.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups. The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au or Melanoma Patients Australia www.melanomapatients.org.au

CanTeen is a national support organisation for 12 - 24 year olds who are living with cancer www.canteen.org.au

References

1. National Cancer Institute. Melanoma treatment (PDQ) – patient version. Available from <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/melanoma/Patient/page4> [Accessed July 2012].
2. Australian Cancer Network Melanoma Guidelines Revision Working Party. Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Management of Melanoma in Australia and New Zealand. Cancer Council Australia and Australian Cancer Network, Sydney and New Zealand Guidelines Group, Wellington (2008).

