

Prevention and Early Detection of Melanoma



This Information Sheet provides general information about melanoma, its causes, risk factors, signs to look for and ways to reduce your risk. If you are concerned about skin changes that might be melanoma, you should see your doctor. For further information contact the Cancer Society's Cancer Information Helpline: 0800 CANCER (0800 226 237).

What is melanoma?

A melanoma is a tumour that develops from melanocytes (pigment cells). Melanoma most commonly occurs in the skin on parts of the body that have been sunburned, but it can appear in skin anywhere on the body. It often appears as a new spot on normal skin, but may develop from an existing mole. If detected when they are thin and at an early stage most melanomas are curable.

Melanoma can spread rapidly and can be life-threatening if left untreated.

What causes melanoma?

Too much sun, especially sunburn, can cause melanoma. Each time your unprotected skin is exposed to the sun's UV radiation or other sources of UV radiation – such as sunbeds – the UV radiation causes changes to the structure of the cells. Overexposure to UV radiation causes the skin permanent damage. The damage worsens with more UV radiation.

The most important years for sun protection are during childhood and early adult years. Exposure to UV radiation during these years greatly increases the chance of getting melanoma later in life.

How common is it?

Melanoma is most common in people with fair skin. People from ethnic groups with naturally darker skin, for example Māori, Pacific and Asian peoples, have more protection from the ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun. However, Māori, Pacific and Asian peoples can still get melanoma.

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of melanoma in the world. Melanoma is diagnosed most often in older adults, but sometimes occurs in younger adults and occasionally in teenagers. It is rare in children.

Can it be prevented?

If people protect their skin and avoid sunburn throughout their lives, and especially during childhood and adolescence, their risk of melanoma is reduced.

Risk factors

Risk factors include:

- fair skin and red or fair hair
- one or more severe sunburns—especially in childhood and adolescence
- use of sunbeds, particularly by young people.

High-risk factors include:

- previous skin cancers, including melanoma
- a family history of melanoma (in a first degree relative: parent, brother, sister or child)
- large, irregularly shaped and unevenly coloured moles called atypical or dysplastic naevi
- large number of moles
- those who have had organ transplants
- some medications – talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Signs of melanoma

The first sign of a melanoma is usually the appearance of a new spot or a change in an existing freckle or mole. The change may be in size, shape and/or colour. The change is normally noticed over several weeks or months rather than days.

A normal freckle or mole has an even colour and a smooth edge. A melanoma often has an irregular edge or surface. It may be spotted with brown, black, blue, red, white and/or light grey.

A freckle or mole that itches or bleeds by itself is sometimes (but not always) a melanoma. A freckle or mole that becomes larger or irregular in shape may be a melanoma. It is quite normal for new moles to appear and change during childhood and early adulthood.

Further information and photo examples of different types of melanoma can be found on the following websites

- New Zealand Dermatological Association:
<http://www.dermnet.org.nz/lesions/melanoma.html>
- Cancer Society of New Zealand. DL Card:
Take Time to Spot the Difference:
<http://www.cancernz.org.nz/reducing-your-cancer-risk/sunsmart/sunsmart-resources/>
- New Zealand Guidelines Group. *Melanoma: Information for you, your family, whānau and friends:* www.nzgg.org.nz/guidelines/0141/Melanoma_CR.pdf

Checking for melanoma

You should regularly check your skin (including skin not normally exposed to the sun) so you will be aware of any changes. This is especially important as you get older, particularly if you are over the age of 50. You should use a hand-held mirror or ask for help from someone else to check difficult to see areas, such as your back and neck. It's important to check areas underneath your armpits, inner legs, ears, eyelids, hands and feet. Use a comb to move sections of hair aside and inspect your scalp.

If you are concerned about skin changes you should seek advice from a doctor.

You may also wish to refer to:

How to check your own skin

Reducing your risk of melanoma

The most important thing is to protect yourself and your family from the sun during peak UV radiation periods. These tend to occur between September and April, especially between 11 am and 4 pm.

Remember to:

- Avoid sunburn.
- Cover up with a broad-brimmed or legionnaire hat, clothing that covers trunk, arms and legs, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- Use an SPF30+, broad spectrum sunscreen on skin that cannot be covered.
- Seek shade between 11 am and 4 pm during the daylight saving months.
- Take special care when you are near reflective surfaces such as snow, water and sand. To protect against reflection, wear sunscreen on your face as well as a hat. You also need to protect yourself on cloudy days as you can be sunburned when you don't expect it. UV radiation cannot be felt and is invisible. Therefore, its presence is not obvious.
- Remember to protect your skin during every day activities such as walking, gardening, shopping and taking part in sports.
- Do not use sunbeds or sunlamps.
- Be good role models for children—Slip Slop Slap and Wrap.