

Melanoma



This 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?

Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. It begins in skin cells called melanocytes. These are the cells that make melanin, which gives skin its colour. Melanin also protects the deeper layers of the skin from the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays.

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

How common is it?

New Zealand has one of the highest melanoma incidence and mortality rates in the world.

In 2004, the year for which the most recent published statistics are available, melanoma was the fourth most common type of cancer registration for both males and females, with 1,896 total melanoma registrations (949 males, 947 females).¹

While registrations are relatively common, the number of deaths is much lower, indicating that treatment can be effective.² In 2004, there were 249 deaths from melanoma (152 males, 97 females). Death rates have been stable since

1995.¹ We do not know why they are higher among men than they are for women.

The likelihood of developing melanoma generally increases with age, with about 70% of cases occurring in those 50 years and older. Nevertheless, it is reasonably common in younger age groups, with significant numbers diagnosed between 25 and 39 years of age in both men and women.³

What causes melanoma?

The main cause of melanoma is exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation in sunlight. Exposure to high doses during holiday and recreational activities is a greater risk than total lifetime exposure, including occupational exposure. Recent research also suggests a link between the use of solarium (tanning beds) and melanoma, particularly when people are exposed to sunbeds before 35 years of age.

Can it be prevented?

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

Risk factors

Sun exposure, including a history of sunburn (especially in childhood and adolescence), is one of the most important risk factors. A fair skin that tends to burn easily and tan poorly is also an important risk factor. Childhood sun exposure and sunburns are also linked with the

development of melanocytic naevi (moles), which is a risk factor for melanoma.

In general there are three main types of risk factors for melanoma that help to identify who is at greater risk. These are:

- genetic (family tendency)
- individual traits (number of moles, hair colour, eye colour, skin colour, etc.)
- environmental (excess exposure to sunlight).

Many of these factors are interrelated, making it difficult to separate out the importance of each. People at high risk of developing melanoma include those with:

- a personal or family history of melanoma (in mother, father, sister, brother, child)
- classical atypical mole syndrome (CAMS)
- presence of atypical moles
- large number of moles

previous non-melanoma skin cancer, and any combination of these risk factors.²

Those who have had organ transplants and other people who have a suppressed immune system are also at high risk.

If you are at high risk of developing melanoma you should discuss with your doctor what methods of protection and checking of your skin are appropriate for you.

Melanoma is less common but can occur among Māori along with Pacific and Asian peoples in New Zealand. While skin colour is the important factor (with darker skin providing some protection), one type of melanoma tends to occur on the soles of the feet, palms of the hand and under the nails in those with darker skins.

Signs of melanoma

Unlike many other forms of cancer, melanoma is often visible – making it easier to detect in the early stages. Early detection is the key to successful treatment and reducing the impact of scars from surgery.

For melanoma, thickness is the most important factor. In general, the thinner the melanoma, the better the outcome. Some types of melanoma develop over a period of weeks or months (they become thick fast), while others tend to develop more slowly (months, sometimes years).

Although melanomas can occur anywhere on the body (including areas not exposed to the sun), the most common sites are the lower legs for women and the upper back for men.

Melanomas usually appear as a changed or new freckle or mole. Often they have an unusual shape or colour or a variety of colours. However, in some cases they may not be coloured. Some types may itch, bleed or weep. Also, some may become raised quickly and could catch on clothing.

Further information and photo examples of different types of melanoma can be found on the website of the New Zealand Dermatological Association:

<http://www.dermnet.org.nz/lesions/melanoma.html>

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.

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Reducing your risk of melanoma

The most important thing is to protect yourself from the sun during peak UV radiation periods. These are between October and March inclusive, especially between 11 am and 4 pm.

Remember to:

Avoid sunburn.

- Cover up with a broad-brimmed or legionnaire hat, clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- Use an SPF30+, broad spectrum sunscreen for skin that cannot be covered.
- Seek shade between 11 am and 4 pm during October and March (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.

- Don't use sunbeds or sunlamps.

Also, make sure that babies and children don't get sunburned.

References

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2. Early Detection Advisory Group. Report on the Early Detection of Skin Cancer in New Zealand. Unpublished report. Wellington: Cancer Society of New Zealand and Health Sponsorship Council, 2006. <http://www.cancernz.org.nz>
3. Sneyd MJ, Cox B. The control of melanoma in New Zealand. New Zealand Medical Journal 2006; 119 (1242). <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/119-1242/2169/>

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