

IS A DEADLY TERRORIST LURKING ON YOUR SKIN?

Melanoma is a serious skin cancer that can affect anyone starting in the preteens and is much more common than you may realize. Among 25 to 29 year olds it is the most prevalent cancer; in women under age 39 the incidence is second to breast cancer. But it is easy to find early while it is thin and curable by quick, painless removal in a doctor's office. **Waiting can be fatal.** Melanomas may develop from pre-existing moles or start in clear areas of the skin, including areas not exposed to sunlight. The first step in checking your skin is to learn about normal and atypical moles. **Normal moles** have round or oval shapes, are less than 1/4 inch wide, have uniform color and shade, and sharp, even borders. **Atypical moles** usually have one or more of these properties:

Width: 1/4 inch or more. Irregular shape. Two or more shades or colors. Fuzzy or notched borders. Raised "fried egg" center. Pebbled surface. The NCI photos at right show a normal mole (L) and two atypical moles (M, R).



The average lifetime risk of melanoma in the white population is about 1 in 56 but may be much higher if you have any of these **risk factors**: **Any atypical moles, even one. More than 50 normal moles. Light complexion, blonde or red hair, light eyes, freckles. History of any blistering sunburns under the age of 20. Personal or family history of any type of skin cancer.** The risk is about 15 times less among African Americans.

Check your skin using a wall mirror in a well-lighted room, a hand mirror with long handle, flashlight, hair brush or dryer for parting hair, and two small chairs or stools.



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Using the wall mirror, hand mirror, and flashlight check all areas of hands, arms, face, ears, neck, underarms, and chest. Women should also check under breasts. Using a brush or dryer to part hair, check scalp and behind ears (or have a family member help). Check upper and lower back thoroughly, then check buttocks and genitals including hidden areas. The back is the most common site of melanoma in males. While sitting on a chair or stool, check all sides of legs and feet including ankles, between toes, and under toenails. Legs are the most common sites of melanoma in females.

See a dermatologist or other health care provider IMMEDIATELY if you find a change in color, size, shape, border, or surface appearance of an existing mole, freckle, birthmark, or other pigmented spot. Likewise if you see a new mole or suspicious spot or growth you hadn't noticed before. Some photos of early melanomas are shown below. Typical characteristics are jagged uneven borders, asymmetry (a line drawn down the middle would not produce matching halves), two or more colors, and large size. The more "atypical" a mole looks the more likely it is to be melanoma. And if a mole is growing faster than you, have it checked no matter what it looks like.



L and R photos by permission of American Academy of Dermatology. All rights reserved. M photo from NCI.

Decreasing the risk of melanoma: minimize exposure to sunlight from 10 am to 4 pm, avoid tanning beds, wear protective clothing including a wide-brim hat. Use sunscreen with an SPF rating of 45 rated for both UVA and UVB. Apply it heavily and reapply it at least once every two hours. There is no such thing as a "healthy" tan. Have a doctor check your family member's skin. Consider

having atypical moles removed if you (or your children) are not likely to notice them routinely.

This information is provided by Melanoma Education Foundation, a non-profit charity founded by the family of Daniel N. Fine of Peabody, Massachusetts, who died of melanoma in 1998 at age 26. Correspondence and contributions may be sent to Melanoma Education Foundation, P.O. Box 2023, Peabody, MA 01960. E-mail: MEF@skincheck.org. Visit skincheck.org for more information, including photos of innocent-looking melanomas.

Disclaimer: Information provided by the Melanoma Education Foundation is for educational purposes only and should not be used for diagnosing or treating skin problems. If you suspect you have a skin problem consult a dermatologist or other professional health care provider.