

Melanoma Skin Cancer

What is melanoma? — Melanoma is a serious form of skin cancer. It happens when normal cells in the skin change into abnormal cells and grow out of control.

Melanoma can occur anywhere on the skin, including the back and other hard-to-see areas. It can also occur on the skin lining the mouth, nose, and genitals. When it is not treated, melanoma can spread to organs inside the body. Melanoma can run in families.

What are the symptoms of melanoma? — Melanoma often looks like a brown or black mole or birthmark. But melanoma has features that make it different from normal moles and birthmarks. People can remember the abnormal features of melanoma by thinking of the letters A, B, C, D, and E (picture 1):

Asymmetry – One half can look different than the other half. **Border** – It can have a jagged or uneven edge. **Color** – It can have different colors. **Diameter** – It is larger than the eraser on the end of a pencil. **Evolution** – Its color or shape can change over time.



Image courtesy of Healthwise, Incorporated and NCI Visuals Online

Early Diagnosis and Dermoscopy

It is critical to get melanoma diagnosed as early as possible. Once melanoma has spread to other parts of the body, a cure is very difficult. Our clinicians can evaluate moles visually or with a technology called **Dermoscopy** to determine whether the mole is suspicious for cancer.

Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer

What is actinic keratosis? — Actinic keratosis (AK) is a skin condition caused by sun damage. It causes scaly, rough, or bumpy spots on the skin ([picture 1](#)). If an area of skin has more than one spot, the spots are called “actinic keratoses.”

How is actinic keratosis treated? — A few people have AK that goes away on its own. This usually only happens in younger people. Most AK needs treatment. The spots can grow, spread, and turn into skin cancer.

The right treatment depends on the size of the AK, where it is on the body, and whether there are one or more spots. Doctors can:

- Freeze the AK off with a special cold liquid (called liquid nitrogen)
- Do surgery to remove the AK
- Give a strong cream or gel to put on the AK – The medicine in the cream or gel can get rid of the AK. If you have an area of skin with several AKs, the doctor might tell you to put cream or gel on that whole area.

What is skin cancer? — Skin cancer happens when normal cells in the skin change into abnormal cells. There are 2 main types of skin cancer: melanoma and non-melanoma. Non-melanoma skin cancer can occur anywhere on the skin, but is often on the head, face, neck, back of the hands, arms, and legs. This is because those body parts are most exposed to the sun’s rays.

Skin cancer is often caused by sun exposure and sunburn. In fact, the damaging effects of the sun build up over time. The more you are exposed to the sun (or to tanning beds) in your life, the higher your risk of skin cancer.

The 2 most common types of non-melanoma skin cancer are called “**basal cell carcinoma**” and “**squamous cell carcinoma.**” Most forms of non-melanoma skin cancer can be easily treated because they grow slowly. But if not treated, some non-melanoma skin cancers can become large or spread inside the body.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosing and removing skin cancers early decreases the amount of skin that has to be removed. Highly suspicious lesions may be removed in entirety and send to the pathologist to confirm the diagnosis. This is often the only treatment required. When the diagnosis is less clear a **punch biopsy** is done to take a small portion of the lesion for evaluation. If there is no cancer noted, less invasive treatment may be advised. If cancer is confirmed, the biopsy is followed by a full excision of the cancer.