

# Melanoma Skin Cancer

What you should know

## What is melanoma skin cancer?

Melanoma is cancer in the skin cells that make melanin. Melanin gives your skin its colour and protects you from ultraviolet (UV) rays present in sunlight.

Melanoma usually starts on the surface of the skin. It can start in moles or in normal-looking skin. Melanoma can affect other parts of the body, but this is rare. For example, the eye or the lining of the nose may be affected by melanoma. Melanoma that spreads to other parts of the body is called advanced melanoma.

## Some facts about melanoma

- ▶ Melanoma is one of the most serious forms of skin cancer, but the sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely it is to be treated successfully.
- ▶ If not treated early, melanoma can spread to other parts of the body.
- ▶ Melanoma is different from non-melanoma skin cancer. Non-melanoma skin cancer is more common than melanoma.
- ▶ Melanoma can affect anyone with any skin tone.

## How common is melanoma?

- ▶ Around 1,200 people are diagnosed with melanoma in Ireland each year.
- ▶ Around 10,000 people are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer.

## What increases my risk of melanoma?

The most common risk factors for melanoma are:

**UV rays:** Frequent and intense exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from sunlight, like for outdoor workers, or from tanning lamps and sun beds, greatly increases your risk of melanoma. People who have used a sunbed, even once, have a 20% increased risk of melanoma. Regularly using sunbeds and using them from a young age further increases your risk.

**A new mole or changes to an existing mole:** See the pictures of moles in this leaflet to learn more.

**Many moles or unusual moles:** Your risk is increased if you have lots of moles or if you have unusually shaped or large moles.

**Family history:** You are more at risk if your parent, brother, sister or your children have with a history of melanoma or skin cancer.

**Skin and hair type and eye colouring:** You are more at risk if you are fair-skinned or freckled with fair or red hair, and if you have blue, green or grey eyes. If you are dark skinned, you have a lower risk of melanoma, but you still need to protect your skin and check for changes.

**History of sunburn:** Severe sunburn or blistering as a child or teenager may increase your risk of developing melanoma later in life.

**Age:** Melanoma affects all age groups, but it is most common between the ages of 30 and 60 years. The risk of developing it increases with age.

**Weakened immune system:** If you have a weakened immune system, your risk of melanoma is greater. For example, if you have had an organ transplant or have HIV/AIDS.

**Genetic skin disorders:** Your risk is greater if you have a genetic condition that makes your skin more sensitive to sunlight. For example, xeroderma pigmentosum.

**Risk factors increase your chance of getting melanoma. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get melanoma. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.**

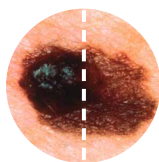
# What are the signs of melanoma?

## 1. Changes in shape

From a round and regular shape to:



Blurred or jagged.



One half unlike the other half.

## 2. Changes in size

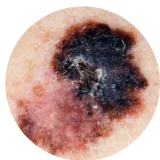
From small (the size of the top of a pencil) to:



Big (larger than the top of a pencil) and growing, or shrinking.

## 3. Changes in colour

Changing from one colour to:



Many shades of brown or black, sometimes even white, red or blue.

Losing colour.

It is normal for moles to grow and develop during childhood and teenage years. But if you are an adult, and you notice any of these signs, or have a mole that is tingling, inflamed, oozing, crusty or bleeding, contact your doctor without delay.

Also, look out for a dark patch or stripe under your nail that gets bigger and wasn't caused by an injury.

**These signs can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out.**

## **How can I check myself?**

1. Look at the front and back of your body in the mirror. Then look at your right and left sides with your arms up.
2. Bend your elbows and look carefully at your palms, forearms and armpits.
3. Look at the fronts and backs of your legs, the tops and bottoms of your feet and between your toes.
4. Check the back of your neck and scalp with a hand mirror. Part your hair for a closer look.
5. Use a hand-mirror to check your back and buttocks.

**Take time today to check your skin for changes. Talk to your GP if you notice anything unusual.**

## Can I be screened for melanoma?

Testing for cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening. There is no melanoma screening programme in Ireland at present.

If you are worried or feel you may be at risk, talk to your GP.

## What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you spot a change to your skin that you are worried about, it's important to have it checked by your GP. The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time.

## How is melanoma diagnosed?

If you have any unusual skin changes or other symptoms, visit your GP without delay. If your GP suspects a melanoma, they will refer you to a skin specialist, such as a dermatologist (skin specialist) or a plastic surgeon.

Tests to diagnose melanoma include:

- ▶ **Skin examination:** A dermatologist examines the area closely to decide if the mole is harmless or not.
- ▶ **Excision biopsy:** The suspicious mole is removed (usually with a local anaesthetic) and the cells are examined under a microscope to see if they are cancerous.

If done early, an excision biopsy often removes all the cancer, so you won't need further treatment. The biopsy should also remove 2–3 mm of normal-looking skin around the affected area.

## How can I reduce my risk of melanoma?

Everyone can take steps to reduce their risk of melanoma no matter what skin tone you have.



Avoid any unnecessary sun exposure, like sunbathing, even if you're protecting your skin.



Avoid getting burned by the sun.



Regularly check your skin. If you find any changes go to the doctor immediately.



Enjoy the sun sensibly and follow the SunSmart code.



## The SunSmart code

Remember to protect your skin, even on cool or cloudy days.



**Seek shade:** Avoid the hottest sun of the day from 11am to 3pm.



**Cover up:** Wear a wide brimmed hat and pick clothes that cover more: shirts with collars, three-quarter length or long sleeves and three-quarter length or long trousers or skirts.



**Wear sunglasses:** Wear glasses with strong UV protection.



**Use sunscreen:** Use a broad-spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 for adults and 50 for children.



**Check the UV Index:** If it's 3 or more, be SunSmart! You can find the daily UV index online, on most weather apps, or in the newspaper.

If you are diagnosed with melanoma, you can find more information in our booklet.



## Contact us for more information or support

If you are worried or have questions about melanoma or any cancer:



**Call our Support Line on Freephone  
1800 200 700.**



**Email [supportline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:supportline@irishcancer.ie)**

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



**Ask about a call in your language.**

Visit our **Daffodil Centres** where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email **[daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie)**

Visit our website **[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)** for more information on melanoma and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

