

Skin Cancer Fact Sheet

for Patients and Caregivers



Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the US. Basal and squamous cell cancers are the most common types of skin cancers. Melanoma is less common but causes almost all skin cancer deaths.

Risk Factors

- **Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays:** Sunlight is the main source of UV rays. Tanning beds are another source of UV rays.
- **Having light-colored skin:** Anyone can get skin cancer, but people with light-colored skin have a higher risk than people with naturally darker skin color.
- **Age:** The risk of skin cancer rises as people get older, but these cancers are becoming more common in younger people.
- **Gender:** Women are more likely than men to get skin cancer before the age of 50. Men are more likely than women to get skin cancer after the age of 50.
- **Having a weakened immune system:** People with weakened immunity have an increased risk of skin cancer.
- **Moles:** People with many moles and those with large or irregular moles have a higher risk for skin cancer.
- **Personal history:** People who have already had skin cancer, and people who have other skin conditions, such as a skin injury or inflammatory skin diseases, actinic keratosis, psoriasis, or xeroderma pigmentosum, have a higher risk of some types of skin cancer.
- **Family history:** People whose parents, brothers, sisters, or children have had melanoma may be at higher risk for melanoma.
- **Radiation exposure:** People who have had radiation therapy have a higher risk of developing skin cancer in the area that was treated.
- **Exposure to certain chemicals:** Being exposed to large amounts of arsenic increases the risk of developing skin cancer.

Prevention

There is no sure way to prevent skin cancer, and some risk factors can't be changed, such as age, skin color, and personal history of the disease. But there are things a person can do to help lower their risk.

- **Limit exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays.**
 - Seek shade whenever possible.
 - Avoid the sun when UV rays are strongest, usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
 - Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30.
 - Wear clothes to protect your skin, such as long sleeves and long pants.
 - Cover your head with a wide-brimmed hat that shades the face, neck, and ears.
 - Wear large-framed, wrap-around sunglasses that block UV rays from your eyes and the skin around them.
 - Avoid sunbathing, tanning beds, and sun lamps.
 - Protect children even more, since they tend to spend more time outdoors. Babies younger than 6 months should be kept out of direct sunlight and protected from the sun using hats and protective clothing.
 - Avoid exposure to harmful chemicals.
 - Check your skin regularly to spot any new growths or changes, and report them to a doctor right away.

Early Detection

Even though the American Cancer Society does not have guidelines for the early detection of skin cancer, everyone should know their own skin. You should learn the patterns of moles, blemishes, freckles, and other marks on your skin so you can notice any changes.

Many doctors recommend checking your skin, preferably once a month. Skin self-exams are best done in a well-lit room in front of a full-length mirror. Use a hand-held mirror for areas that are hard to see.

Any spots on your skin that are new or changing in size, shape, or color should be checked by a doctor.

Signs and Symptoms

Signs of skin cancer may include changes in the size, shape, or color of a mole or other skin lesion; or a new growth or spot on the skin. Let your doctor know about any spots that are new or are changing.

- **Basal cell skin cancers** may appear as flat, firm, pale, or yellow areas; raised reddish patches that might be itchy; small, shiny bumps that are pink or red; pink growths with raised edges; or open sores that don't heal or that heal and then come back. Basal cell cancers might bleed after an injury.
- **Squamous cell cancers** may appear as rough or scaly red patches; raised growths or lumps; open sores that don't heal or that heal and then come back; or wart-like growths.
- **Melanoma** may appear as a new spot on the skin or a spot that is changing in size, shape, or color. Other signs of melanoma include a sore that doesn't heal, changes in the skin around a mole, itchiness, tenderness, or pain.



Treatment

Treatment for skin cancer depends on the type and stage of the cancer, as well as the person's age, other health problems, and personal choices. Also, special testing might be done on the cancer to figure out the best treatment. If you have skin cancer, talk to your doctor about the best treatment for you.

Living With Skin Cancer

Having skin cancer affects a person's quality of life. Physical, social, mental health, spiritual, and money issues can come up at any time.

Some types of skin cancer, especially melanoma, can be serious. Palliative care is focused on helping to improve the quality of life and dealing with issues that people living with a serious illness might have. People with melanoma may benefit from having palliative care at any time.

Good communication between a person with cancer and the health care team is important and involves:

- Asking and answering questions
- Working together to set care goals
- Making shared decisions
- Managing side effects and other issues
- Scheduling follow-up tests and care

Visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer or call us at **1-800-227-2345** to learn more. We're here when you need us.

