

# Melanoma

## Why is Melanoma Important?

Skin cancer is estimated to account for over 80% of new cancers in New Zealand each year. New Zealand has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world which is reflected in the high rates of Melanoma. In 2013, there were **2366 registrations of Melanoma in New Zealand and 489 deaths due to melanoma and other malignant neoplasms of the skin**. Melanoma is responsible for the most deaths of any skin cancer in New Zealand.

## What is Melanoma?

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer, which arises from the pigment cells (melanocytes) in the skin. In a melanoma skin cancer the melanocytes become malignant and multiply excessively. One of the most important causes of melanoma is exposure to too much ultraviolet light in sunlight and sunbeds but other factors such as skin type, family history and other medical conditions and medications also play a role.

Melanocytes make a brown/black pigment (known as melanin), and often the first sign of a melanoma developing is a previous mole changing in colour or a new brown/black lesion developing.

***Melanoma is considered to be the most serious type of skin cancer because it is more likely to spread (metastasise) from the skin to other parts of the body than other types of skin cancer.*** If melanoma has spread to other parts of the body, those deposits are known as secondary melanoma (secondaries/metastases).

## What causes Melanoma?

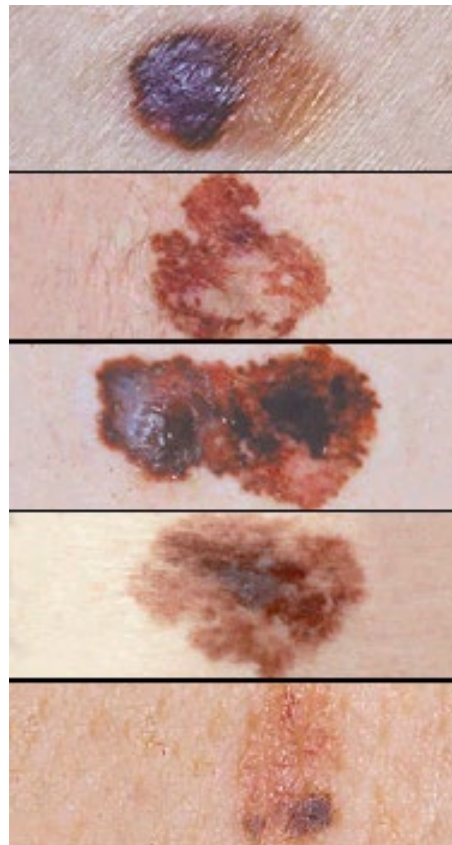
Melanoma is caused by changes to the DNA in the pigment producing melanocytes in your skin. The DNA is responsible for controlling the growth of these cells. Damage to the DNA leads to uncontrolled growth and destruction which we call cancer. The most important cause of damage is too much exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun or other sources such as sunbeds. Other factors which can contribute to the development of melanoma include having a family history of melanoma (If a close blood relative develops melanoma then your risk is approximately doubled) medical conditions or medications which weaken your immune system. Avoiding these potential causes is one way of reducing your risk of developing Melanoma.

## What does Melanoma look like?

Often the first sign of melanoma is a change in the shape, color, size, or feel of an existing mole. However, melanoma may also appear as a new mole where you haven't had one before. Most frequently there is darkening in colour but occasionally there is loss of pigmentation with pale areas or red areas developing. Other changes in moles such as itching, pain or bleeding can also indicate development of Melanoma. The only way to confirm a diagnosis of melanoma is to remove tissue and check it for cancer cells under a microscope.

## Thinking "SCAN" can help you remember what to look for:

- **Sore:** Itching, pain or bleeding indicate possible features of concern.
- **Changing:** Change over time is the cornerstone of cancerous lesions.
- **Abnormal:** Does it look different to your other skin lesions. The "Ugly Duckling".
- **New:** New moles after age 40 are unlikely and should warrant suspicion for Melanoma.





### **Can melanoma be prevented?**

The good news is that if detected early, Melanoma can be effectively treated. That's why new moles or existing moles that have recently changed appearance must be checked by an experienced skin specialist. In fact, you should have a regular skin checks to maximise the chances of picking up Melanoma early.

Of course, the most effective way to prevent Melanoma is to practice sun safety at all times (especially with children). This means avoiding exposure to the sun during the hottest parts of the day, as well as protecting your skin with sunscreen, clothing and a hat whenever you're outside (even on cloudy days).

### **Can Melanoma be cured?**

Yes, Melanoma can be cured as long as it's caught early enough. The earlier melanoma is detected and removed the less risk of spread and subsequent health implications.

The commonest treatment for Melanoma is surgery. Usually, this means cutting away the cancer, along with some clear skin around it. The skin is then closed with a few stitches, but sometimes a small skin graft is needed.

This is usually a 2-step process where the details of the cancer are determined by an initial surgical sample. This determines how deep and wide the second "definitive" surgery needs to be to sure enough tissue is removed to effectively manage the cancer and prevent it from recurring or spreading.

For more aggressive tumours samples of the local lymph nodes need to be taken to ensure the cancer hasn't spread and additional management (such as radiotherapy or chemotherapy) may need to be arranged. This is usually performed at the local hospital with the support of the local cancer specialists.

### **Self-care (What can I do?)**

Treatment will be much easier if your Melanoma is detected early. Melanoma can vary in their appearance, but it is advisable to see your doctor if you have any marks or scabs on your skin which meet the **SCAN criteria**.

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### **Top sun safety tips:**

- Protect your skin with clothing, and don't forget to wear a hat that protects your face, neck and ears, and a pair of UV protective sunglasses.
- When choosing a sunscreen look for a high protection SPF (SPF 15 or more) to protect against UVB, and the UVA circle logo to protect against UVA. Apply plenty of sunscreen 15 to 30 minutes before going out in the sun, and reapply every 2 hours and straight after swimming and towel-drying.

### **What to do if I have a lump or bump that could be Melanoma?**

Contact your General Practitioner or **Accredited Skin Cancer Doctor** to have your lesion reviewed and decisions about the need for diagnosis and management can be safely made.

***For further information contact your Skin Cancer Doctor for advice or review of any lesions of concern.***