

## Melanoma Prevention

### What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a serious type of skin cancer which, if not removed early while it is thin, can spread internally and be fatal. Its cancerous cells are found in melanocytes (cells that make melanin and give skin its color). These cells are located in the epidermis, the top layer of the skin. Of the three commonly known types of skin cancer (basal and squamous cell are the others), melanoma is the most dangerous. It is often ignored until too late because, in the early stages, it looks harmless and causes no discomfort. Many people don't realize that a little mark on their skin could be a major warning sign.

Melanomas often develop from preexisting moles but may also arise in normal skin and in freckles, blemishes, birthmarks, and other pigmented (i.e., darker colored) areas. Sun exposure is believed to be a factor in 50-70 percent of new melanomas, but they can also occur in areas that are not normally exposed to sunlight.

Although rare in children, melanoma occurs in every age group after puberty and is the most common cancer in young adults, ages 25-29. Most new melanoma patients have no family history of the disease; it can affect anyone regardless of health, physical condition, or skin complexion.

### What the risk factors are

Your risk for contracting melanoma could be higher if you have any of the following risk factors:

- fifty or more ordinary moles
- any atypical moles, even one (see next section)
- history of blistering sunburns, especially before age 20
- sun-sensitive skin which burns or freckles easily
- personal/family history of any type of skin cancer
- sporadic exposure of normally covered skin to strong sunlight
- use of tanning salons

### What are the signs?

The first step in finding melanoma is to learn about moles, which are common pigmented skin lesions that may be flat or raised. There are two types of moles, ordinary and atypical (the medical term for atypical moles is dysplastic nevi). Atypical moles are the ones you should watch most closely when examining yourself. A mole may be atypical if it has one or more of the characteristics shown below.

Atypical moles usually have:

- an irregular shape or uneven border
- two or more shades of brown or pink
- a 1/4 inch or more diameter
- a bumpy surface
- flat edges with a raised center ("fried egg" shape)

### How to examine your skin

When melanoma is found at an early stage, it can be easily removed by a simple, painless procedure at a doctor's office. The key to early detection is getting to know your skin through a 10-minute, monthly skin check. With the help of a mirror, you should examine yourself thoroughly from head to toe. Men should take extra care to examine their backs (the most common site of melanomas in males) and women should carefully check their legs (the most common sites of melanomas in females).

### What to look for during a skin check

- any new moles
- new "freckles" that look darker or different than others
- new spots that are black
- any unusual moles or pigmented areas
- any change (growth, shape, or color) in a mole, blemish, freckle, birthmark, or other pigmented area
- persistent skin changes such as bleeding or itching
- a persistent change in surface texture

- a change in the way a mole or pigmented area feels to the touch
- redness or other color extending into the skin surrounding a mole or pigmented area
- a mole or spot that looks differently than those around it

### Warning signs

You should contact Gannett or your health care provider promptly if you detect any of these signs or find other changes or suspicious growths on your skin

If your skin check shows everything is OK, you still need to complete three important steps:

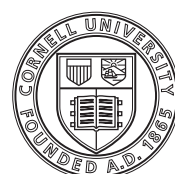
1. If you have any atypical moles which you've noticed before and are certain have not changed, examine them visually and by touch so you will recognize any future changes.
2. Mark the calendar to check your skin again next month. Choose an easily remembered date like the first of the month or the same day as your birthday. Do it, or you will forget!
3. Beyond your own monthly exams, remember to ask your primary care provider for a skin examination when you have your annual physical exam.

### Protect yourself from melanoma

Exposure to the sun's UV (ultra-violet) rays significantly increases the risk of developing skin cancer. Given that sun exposure is believed to be a factor in 50 to 70 percent of new melanomas, it is important to:

### Avoid sun tanning and tanning lamps

If you want a tan, the only safe way is to use a sunless bronzing lotion. Bronzing lotions contain an active ingredient that safely tans the outer layer of the skin without the damaging effects of ultraviolet radiation. They safely produce tans that are indistinguishable from those acquired through sunlight and tanning salons.



### **Protect your skin and prevent sun burn**

- Limit sun exposure between 10 am and 4 pm.
- Avoid sudden exposure of normally covered skin to strong sunlight after long periods of non- exposure.
- Wear protective clothing, a baseball hat, UV protective sunglasses, and seek shade.
- Use sunscreen. Choose a waterproof product with an SPF (Sun Protection Factor) rating of at least 30. Apply it heavily 30 minutes before exposure, and reapply every 90 minutes.

### **Have an annual skin exam done by a health-care provider**

In addition to your own monthly skin checks, an annual head-to-toe skin examination by your primary care provider should be a routine part of your health maintenance. If a skin examination is not offered during your annual physical exam, request that it be included, especially if you have any of the risk factors.

#### **For more information**

To learn more about melanoma and details on how to examine your skin, (including pictures of what to look for), go to [www.skincheck.com](http://www.skincheck.com)

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#### **Fall and Spring Semester Hours:**

Monday-Friday	8:30 am-5:00 pm
Saturday	10:00 am-4:00pm
Sunday	building closed

Check the web for hours during breaks, winter and summer sessions: [www.gannett.cornell.edu](http://www.gannett.cornell.edu)

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