
Melanoma

What is melanoma?

Malignant melanoma is one of the most deadly of all cancers. It begins in the melanocytes, those skin cells that produce the brown pigment, melanin, which makes the skin tan. The malignant cells still produce the melanin pigment so the tumor usually is a mixture of tan, brown or black. Melanoma can spread to distant organs, making early detection and treatment essential.

How can I tell if I have melanoma?

Melanoma may begin in a mole or arise on normal skin. The most worrisome moles are flat or only slightly raised but many people call these freckles. If you have moles, you should check them each month to be certain there are no changes in size, color, shape or sensation such as itching. In addition, a dermatologist should check your moles at least once a year or when you detect a change in a mole. Early melanoma is curable with a simple office surgery.

What causes melanoma?

While the cause of melanoma is not known, it is likely that environmental toxins and radiation can damage melanocytes, predisposing them to form moles and cancers. Intense sun exposure on the face and scalp can also lead to a form of melanoma called lentigo maligna.

How is melanoma treated?

Melanoma may be removed in a variety of ways. Surgical excision and Moh's surgery are both effective and satisfactory. The dermatologist has training in these methods of treatment and can select the one most appropriate for the individual situation.

After one of these tumors has been removed, patients return for follow-up evaluation of the scar usually every three months during the first three years after treatment. After this time, patients are checked every six months by the dermatologist but they must check themselves at least monthly since they are at increased risk for a second melanoma.

How can I protect myself?

Avoiding sun-exposure with hats and sun protective clothing and use of topical antioxidants such as topical Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and Retin-A (prescription required) are methods that have shown efficacy in the prevention of skin cancers.

Patients with melanomas which have gone beyond the early stage, should be followed by a dermatologist and an oncologist, who will stage the disease and recommend additional treatment.