Who's at risk?

In general...
Melanoma can affect young adults as well as older people, but is extremely rare in children. White people are much more likely to get melanoma than those with brown or black skins. Individuals who have lived in sunny countries are at greater risk, as are people with lots of moles.

In particular...
Everyone needs to watch their skin and protect it from sunburn. But people who need to take special care are those who have:

- fair or freckled skin that doesn't tan,
- red or fair hair and pale eyes
- large numbers of normal moles — over 100 in young people, over 50 in older people
- unusual 'dysplastic' moles (large, irregular and multi-coloured)
- suffered from severe sunburn, especially in childhood
- a family history of melanoma
- had a previous melanoma
- an outdoor job

Looking after your skin

- take care never to burn
- avoid the sun when at its height (usually 11am-3pm)
- remember the sun is stronger nearer the equator and at high altitudes
- take extra special care of babies' and children’s delicate skin
- wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses with UV protection
- cover up with tightly woven, loose-fitting clothes or keep in the shade
- always use sunscreen (SPF 15 or higher) with UVA protection, even if you have a tan
- use common sense whenever you're in the sun — sunburn can ruin your holiday and age your skin prematurely
- damage to skin from the sun adds up over the years — elderly people who take long holidays in sunny countries still need to protect their skin
- avoid using sunbeds and lamps — they age the skin and may cause skin cancer
- check your skin regularly and report any unusual changes to your doctor without delay

Further information

Cancer Research UK website
www.cancerresearchuk.org
About cancer/Reducing risk

For more about cancer, visit our patient information website www.cancerhelp.org.uk click on specific cancers then malignant melanoma.

If you have a question about cancer you can call our specialist information nurses on their direct line 020 7269 3142 or freephone 0800 (CANCER) 226237.

About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the leading charity dedicated to research on the causes, treatment and prevention of cancer. If you would like to support our work please call 020 7269 3662 or visit our website.

Cancer Research UK
PO Box 123
London WC2A 3PX
020 7242 0300

In parts of the world such as Australia information like this has helped to cut deaths from melanoma by encouraging people with early, curable disease to see their doctor.

Take care of your skin, it's yours for life.

malignant melanoma
A skin cancer that's important to spot early

Be a molewatcher...for life

CANCER RESEARCH UK

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Malignant melanoma facts

Malignant melanoma, also known as melanoma, is the most serious type of skin cancer. It often starts with a change in the normal look or feel of a mole. If you notice changes in a mole or in previously normal skin, it is important to act right away. Most changes are not caused by cancer, but do need to be checked out.

Melanoma can be cured when found early and treated quickly.

What are the signs of melanoma?

Here is a checklist to help you pick out a mole or dark patch that you should show your doctor. Checking moles on your back may be difficult, but you could ask a friend or partner to look at them for you.

See your doctor immediately if...

- an existing mole or dark patch is getting larger or a new one is growing. Growth or change in moles becomes less common as we get older;
- a mole has a ragged outline. Ordinary moles have a smooth, regular shape;
- a mole has a mixture of different shades of brown and black. Ordinary moles may be dark brown but are all one shade.

The following signs do not necessarily mean that you have a melanoma, but you should still look out for them. If your mole or dark patch does not return to normal within two weeks, don't ignore it.

- see your doctor;
- an inflamed mole or one with a reddish edge. An ordinary mole is not inflamed;
- a bleeding, oozing or crusting mole. Ordinary moles do not do this;
- a change in sensation of a mole, like a mild itch. An ordinary mole is not usually itchy or painful;
- a mole that is bigger than all your other moles.

Photographs of malignant melanoma (skin cancer)

Each mark of scale = 1 mm

- Dark colour of a melanoma
- Inflamed edge of a melanoma on an existing mole
- Small melanoma with irregular colour and shape
- The centre of the melanoma appears to have returned to normal while it continues to grow at the edge

Irregular outline of a melanoma

How does it start?

The main cause of melanoma is excessive exposure to the sun. Severe sunburn or long-term sun exposure over many years, even in the UK, can lead to melanoma.

Does melanoma spread?

Melanoma will spread to other parts of the body if left untreated. Some melanomas spread more quickly than others. It is essential to see your doctor as soon as you notice any changes.

What will happen at the doctor's?

If your doctor isn't sure whether your mole or dark patch is OK, you will be referred to a hospital specialist. If your specialist thinks it might be a melanoma, it will be removed in a simple operation under local anaesthetic. The mole will then be examined under a microscope. If it is a melanoma you may be given further treatment and invited to attend regular check-ups at the hospital.