



## Understanding Skin Cancer

Death from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, has been climbing steadily since 1950. Each year in the US, more than 65,000 people will develop the disease and 8,500 will die from it. In addition to melanoma, more than 1,500,000 people this year will develop the two most common non-melanoma skin cancers. Both can cause significant damage and disfigurement, but most cases do not result in death.

Washington Imaging Services and The American Cancer Society recommend that everyone perform a skin self-examination regularly and have a yearly skin examination by your doctor, especially if you suspect that a lump, spot or mole may possibly be skin cancer. If you are in a high-risk classification for skin cancer, it is recommended that you see a dermatologist annually.

### Risk Factors

Everyone is at risk for developing skin cancer. However, certain characteristics make people more at risk for developing skin cancer. Risk factors include:

- Fair or lighter skin tones
- People with freckles
- Skin that burns easily
- Light colored eyes, such as green or blue eyes
- Naturally red or blonde hair
- Prolonged exposure to sun through work or play
- Personal or family history of skin cancer or melanoma

If you are unsure of your skin cancer risk, talk to your doctor. In the meantime, be sure to follow safe sun practices.

### Melanoma

Melanoma develops in cells called melanocytes. Melanocytes are cells that are responsible for creating skin pigmentation or melanin. Melanin is what gives our skin its natural hue. As skin is exposed to the UV rays of the sun, more melanin is produced to prevent burning of the skin. The end result is damage to the DNA in skin cells. UV rays can also be found in tanning booths and lamps, so indoor tanning is not any safer.

### Non-melanoma Skin Cancer

Most skin cancers are classified as non-melanoma, usually occurring in either basal cells or squamous cells. These cells are located at the base of the outer layer of the skin or cover the internal and external surfaces of the body. Most non-melanoma skin cancers develop on sun-exposed areas of the body, like the face, ear, neck, lips or the backs of the hands. Depending on the type, they can be fast or slow growing, but they rarely spread to other parts of the body.

### Symptoms of Skin Cancer

Early detection is important, so pay close attention to the following symptoms:

- A small lump (spot or mole) that is shiny, waxy, pale in color, and smooth in texture
- A red lump (spot or mole) that is firm
- A sore or spot that bleeds or become crusty, or a sore that don't heal
- Rough and scaly patches on the skin
- Flat scaly areas of the skin that are red or brown
- Any new growth that is suspicious—keeping in mind that these growths are usually painless



## Examining Yourself for Signs of Skin Cancer

When doing a self examination, use a mirror so you can view all parts of the body. Look for any changes in the color, shape and size of any freckle, mole, blemish or reddened area. It is helpful to know the ABC's of skin cancer (Asymmetry, Border, Color, Diameter and Elevation.). Sometimes these areas may be itchy, scaly or even have a crusty appearance. If bleeding or oozing comes from a mole or spot, it is imperative that it be examined by a physician. This is often indicative of advanced melanoma and needs to be evaluated.

Melanoma is treatable when detected early. Moles or other spots on the skin should be self examined each month. Look for any changes in the existing areas and look for new moles. Keep a written log or create a body diagram showing the location and state of any mole, freckle or blemish you are monitoring. Follow this link for more on doing a [monthly self skin exam](#).

## Putting Prevention into Practice

Skin cancer is easily preventable by the use of sun block and by limiting the exposure of your skin to harsh UV rays. Surveys show the public is far better educated today about skin cancer prevention than it was 50 years ago, yet skin cancer is still very prominent in our population. So why the disconnect? Dr. Perry Robins at the Skin Cancer Foundation offers these explanations:

- **Time lag:** The majority of skin cancers result from years of cumulative sun exposure. These cancers are most prevalent among older Americans (between 40 and 50 percent of Americans who live to age 65 will have skin cancer at least once). The incidence figures we see now reflect sun-worshipping behaviors common in the US 20+ years ago.
- **Behavior trails knowledge:** Although people are more aware of the importance of sun protection, it takes a long time to change behavior patterns. Still, according to a joint 2007 survey by The Skin Cancer Foundation and the online women's community iVillage, 59 percent of Americans use sunscreen at least occasionally—a 20 percent increase from a survey done just four years earlier. To combat the culturally entrenched compulsion to tan, the Foundation has launched a campaign geared to dispelling the idea that tanned skin is still in fashion. With the help of celebrities and beauty editors, the Foundation's "Go With Your Own Glow" campaign is gaining momentum.
- **Young people's feeling of invincibility:** Each generation has to be convinced anew of the dangers of sun damage. One of our responsibilities is to show young people how mistreating their skin can seriously damage it, sometimes sooner rather than later. Melanoma is now the second most common form of cancer for young adults 15-29 years old.
- **Indoor tanning:** Tanning salons appeared in the US in the late 1970s. UV tanning lamps can emit harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation up to 12 times stronger than the sun. But on an average day, more than one million Americans use tanning salons. The tanning industry unfortunately tries to convince people that indoor tanning is safe—dangerous misinformation that The Skin Cancer Foundation strives to refute on behalf of the public.

## Skin Cancer Facts

The facts about skin cancer are alarming. The following observations show how skin cancer can affect us all, directly and indirectly:



## WASHINGTON IMAGING SERVICES

- **More than 90% of skin cancer is caused by sun exposure:** The UV rays of the sun are responsible for non-melanoma skin cancers. Unprotected exposure to these rays can be from being outdoors, using tanning booths or from UV transfer through your car or home windows.
- **Each hour, a person dies from skin cancer in the US:** About 2,800 people will die of non-melanoma skin cancer and about 8,000 will die of melanoma in the U.S. this year. Most of these deaths could have been prevented by simply protecting one's self from the sun.
- **Skin cancer accounts for more than 50% of all cancers combined:** Skin cancer is the most commonly diagnosed type of cancer among men and women. The American Cancer Society estimates that 1.5 million cases of skin cancer will be diagnosed this year. One in 5 Americans and 1 in 3 Caucasians will be diagnosed with skin cancer sometime in their life.
- **Skin cancer is most deadly for African Americans, Asians, and Latinos:** Although the risk factor is rather low for African Americans, Asians, and Latinos, skin cancer can be the most deadly for these groups.
- **One bad burn during your childhood doubles the risk factor for melanoma later in life:** Protecting children against UV exposure is essential for skin health into adulthood. A blistering sun burn during childhood significantly increases the risk of melanoma as an adult.
- **Men are diagnosed with skin cancer more often than women:** The American Cancer Society statistics show that men are twice as likely to develop skin cancer than women. It is the most common cancer in men over 50, far exceeding the incidence of prostate cancer, lung cancer and colon cancer. This makes skin cancer the most common cancer in men over 50.