

# Health Spotlight: Melanoma

In part 1 of our new series on common health conditions, we unpack the statistics on melanoma skin cancer and how it develops.

- Around 16,000 people are diagnosed with melanoma each year in Australia<sup>1</sup>
- Melanoma is the second most common cancer in men and the third most common cancer in women in Australia
- Around 1300 people died from melanoma in Australia in 2022<sup>2</sup>
- The five year survival rate for melanoma is 93%
- More than 10% of all cancers diagnosed in 2022 were melanoma

## What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a type of cancer that develops in the skin's pigment cells (melanocytes). The role of these cells is to help protect the skin from ultraviolet (UV) radiation, that comes from sunlight.

In doing so they form a mole on the skin. Most moles are safe, however if they grow in an unregulated way or mutate, they can become a melanoma.

Melanoma can occur anywhere on the skin, even in areas that are not exposed to the sun (e.g. inside the mouth or on the soles of the feet.) It is the most serious form of skin cancer and can grow quickly. If undetected or untreated, it can spread to the lower part of the skin (dermis), enter the lymphatic system or bloodstream and spread to other parts of the body.

A staging system is used to determine the severity of the cancer and most appropriate treatment. Early-stage melanoma is generally treated through surgery, but there is no mandated treatment for advanced melanoma - treatment will depend on the individual case.

## Warning signs

Melanoma is a type of cancer that may have no obvious symptoms. The first warning sign is usually a change in an existing mole or the appearance of a new spot. A change may occur to the colour, size, shape or elevation (it becomes raised) or it may start to itch or bleed.

Keep in mind that moles will change over time and this is quite normal. Anything that is cause for concern should be examined by a doctor or skin specialist.

They will use the ABCDE method to identify symptoms and make a diagnosis. This stands for asymmetry (A), border (B), colour (C), diameter (D) and evolving (E).

## Risk factors

Australia is blessed with a warm, sunny climate but the biggest cause of melanoma is exposure to UV radiation, in particular episodes of sunburn. The risk is also higher for people who have unprotected sun exposure, have a number of unusual moles, have weaker immune systems, a family history of melanoma in a first degree relative, have a fair complexion or have had a previous skin cancer.

## How to protect yourself

- Understand your risk factors
- Check your skin regularly and see a doctor straight away if you find anything suspicious
- Schedule an annual skin check with a doctor or specialist
- When outdoors on a sunny day, wear a hat, sunscreen, sunglasses and use a sun shelter (e.g. beach canopy)
- Stay out of the sun – particularly at the hottest part of the day or when the UV index exceeds 3
- Be aware of your family history – find out if any relatives have been previously diagnosed
- Knowing your risk, you may wish to consider whether you have adequate insurance (e.g. life, trauma, total & permanent disability, income protection) to protect what you value most in life.

1 Understanding Melanoma: A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends. Cancer Council, January 2021

2 Melanoma of the skin statistics. Cancer Australia, September 2022

