

Check Your Skin, Save Your Life

The skin is the body's largest organ. It protects against heat, sunlight, injury, and infection. Skin also helps control body temperature and stores water, fat, and vitamin D. The skin has several layers, but the two main layers are the epidermis (upper or outer layer) and the dermis (lower or inner layer). Skin cancer normally begins in the epidermis, which is made up of three kinds of cells:

- Squamous cells: Thin, flat cells that form the top layer of the epidermis.
- Basal cells: Round cells under the squamous cells.
- Melanocytes: Found in the lower part of the epidermis, these cells make melanin, the pigment that gives skin its natural color. When skin is exposed to the sun, melanocytes make more pigment, causing the skin to tan, or darken.

The three most common types of skin cancer are basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma is the most common and melanoma is the least common skin cancer. In 2002, an estimated 1.3 million Americans were diagnosed with skin cancer. Of these, 53,000 individuals were diagnosed with melanoma, the most common fatal form of skin cancer, and more than 7,000 Americans died of melanoma. Nonmelanoma skin cancer has the highest incidence of all cancers in the United States. The rise in the rate of cutaneous melanoma exceeds all other preventable cancers.

The American Academy of Dermatology and Center for Disease Control and Prevention has identified risk factors and warning signs for melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancer include the following:

Risk factors:	<u>Melanoma</u>	<u>Nonmelanoma</u>
	Age greater than 15 yrs	Older age
	Fair Complexion	Fair complexion
	Changing Mole	Male sex
	Presence of many moles	Inability to tan
	Atypical moles	prolonged redness after sun exposure
	Family Hx	White race
	Sun sensitivity	Reside near equator
	Excessive sun exposure	
	Medical conditions of chronic osteomyelitis, burns, scars, chronic skin ulcers, xeroderma pigmentosum, and HPV	

Warning signs for melanoma skin cancer include new, changing, or changed moles; unusual moles; or symptomatic moles with pain, itching, burning. Warning signs for nonmelanoma skin cancer include a sore that will not heal, a scaly spot, an enlarging pink or red growth, or a pearly bump.

To screen for skin lesions one should follow the ABCD checklist. The presence of one or more of these elements raises suspicion that the lesion is cancerous.

A = symmetry	When bisected one half of the lesion is not identical to the other half.
B = border	The border is uneven or ragged as opposed to smooth and straight.
C = color	The lesion is more than one shade of pigment.
D = diameter	The diameter is greater than 6 mm.

Given the obvious benefit of early skin cancer detection, everyone should familiarize themselves with the warning signs and ABCD's of skin cancer screening. Regular examination of the skin by both you and your doctor increases the chance of finding melanoma early. Most melanomas that appear in the skin can be seen by the naked eye. Usually, there is a long period of time when the tumor grows beneath the top layer of skin but does not grow into the deeper skin layers. This period of slow growth allows time for skin cancer to be found early. Skin cancer may be cured if the tumor is found before it spreads deeper. Monthly self-examination of the skin may help find changes that should be reported to a doctor.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice or your own specific medical problems. Have a question? Write to Questions from the Field, Gananda-Walworth Physical Therapy and Village Fitness, 1218 Mayberry Place, Macedon, NY 14502, or send e-mail to gwpt@rochester.rr.com.