

Skin Cancer

Women are more likely to get skin cancer than men. But men are more likely to die from it. Skin cancer affects all age groups and is one of the cancers regularly seen in younger people.



What is skin cancer?

It is cancer that begins in the skin. There are two types:

Non-melanoma - cancer that develops slowly on the upper layers of the skin. These are more common but less serious. The first sign of non-melanoma skin cancer is usually the appearance of a lump or patch on the skin that doesn't heal after a few weeks. In most cases, cancerous lumps are red and firm, while cancerous patches are often flat and scaly.

Melanoma - these cancers are more serious and can spread to other parts of the body. Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that can spread to other organs in the body. The most common sign of melanoma is the appearance of a new mole or a change in an existing mole. This can happen anywhere on the body, but the back, legs, arms and face are most commonly affected. In most cases, melanomas have an irregular shape and more than one colour. They may also be larger than normal moles and can sometimes be itchy or bleed.

How serious is it?

Survival rates are improving, but skin cancer, especially melanoma, can kill if it is not caught quickly.



How do you spot skin cancer?

Keep an eye on your moles. You have umpteen moles, freckles and marks on your skin. It's important to know how to spot when one of them has turned cancerous. The NHS has developed a checklist for moles called ABCDE – click here to check your mole: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/malignant-melanoma/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Where are you most likely to get skin cancer?

Men are most likely to develop a melanoma on the chest or back and women on the legs.

Why has there been such an increase in skin cancer?

Mainly because we are getting more sun, our climate is slowly changing and we go on more holidays in the sun. Rates have always been higher in sunnier areas of the country and skin cancer is one of the few cancers you are more likely to get if you are rich than poor because you are more likely to take holidays in intense sun.

Exposure to ultraviolet light (UV) is the main cause of the disease. The sun is our main source of UV so changing our behavior slightly can reduce the risks.

- Some sunlight is good for you - it boosts vitamin D - but sun-bathing should be kept to a minimum.

- Think about other places you might be exposed to the sun: driving (80% of UV gets through the average car window), gardening, walking, at work if you work outside and sun beds also increase your risk. (They can be even worse than the sun as the radiation is more concentrated.)

Other risk factors:

Your personal risk depends on your family history. Malignant melanoma risk is doubled in people with a family history of the same disease. It also depends on your skin and hair type. Malignant melanoma risk is 57% higher in people with blue eyes than with brown eyes, it is 200% higher in red/red-blond hair, compared with dark-haired people.



As a rule, the more freckles/moles you have the lighter your skin type and the more you should stay out of the sun.

What can I do to protect myself?

- Remember, the sun is at its hottest between 11am and 3pm, try to stay out of the sun during these hours.
- Don't burn. Each time you do, you increase your risk of future cancer.
- Limit the time you spend in the sun.
- Use sunscreen, make sure it is suitable for your skin type and blocks both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation. Use a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. Reapply every two hours and use waterproof sunscreen if in the water. Don't forget sensitive areas that burn like noses, ears and the top of your head.
- Cover up and dress sensibly. Many men protect themselves with hats, sunglasses and T-shirts (not too thin as UV can get through thin cotton). If you're exposed to a lot of sun at work your employers should help out with protective equipment.
- Avoid sun-beds and other tanning devices
- Check your moles and freckles regularly

Treating Skin Cancer:

Surgery is the main treatment for cancer, although it may depend on your individual circumstances. The surgery is generally minor. The affected area is completely removed, usually under local anaesthetic, however this will depend on the site, size and grade of cancer. Radiotherapy can also be used to treat some types of skin cancer, or cancers that cover larger areas. Chemotherapy is used for certain types of cancer, particularly those in the very top layer of skin. Immunotherapy and Photodynamic therapy are relatively new types of treatment and are another alternative to surgery.



Further Information:

For Non-melanoma: <http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/skin-cancer> and <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cancer-of-the-skin/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

For Melanoma: <http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/melanoma> and <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/malignant-melanoma/Pages/Introduction.aspx>