

What Is Melanoma and How Can I Tell If a Mole Should Be Checked?

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that develops in melanocytes, the cells that give your skin its color. It can sometimes develop in an existing mole, but it can also appear as a new spot on otherwise normal skin. Finding melanoma early is important because it is highly treatable when diagnosed before it grows deeper or spreads.

At Calvert Dermatology, we encourage our patients to become familiar with their skin and to have any new or changing spots evaluated. Knowing what your moles and other spots normally look like can make it easier to notice changes that may need professional attention.

What Is Melanoma?

Melanoma is a form of skin cancer that begins in melanocytes. Although melanoma is less common than basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, it can be more serious because it has the ability to spread to other parts of the body if it is not diagnosed and treated.

Melanoma can develop anywhere on the skin. It may occur in areas that receive a lot of sun exposure, but it can also develop in areas that are less exposed to the sun. Melanoma can occur under or around the nails, on the palms of the hands, or on the soles of the feet. People of all ages and skin tones can develop melanoma.

What Does Melanoma Look Like?

Melanoma does not always look the same from person to person. It may resemble an unusual mole, a dark spot, or another type of skin growth. Sometimes it can be difficult to recognize because it does not have all of the typical warning signs.

A helpful way to remember some of the signs of melanoma is the ABCDE pattern. If one half of the spot does not look like the other half, if the borders are irregular, uneven, scalloped, or poorly defined, the spot may contain different colors or shades, such as brown, black, tan, red, white, or blue, if the diameter is larger than 6 millimeters, but the size alone should not determine whether a spot needs to be checked, and lastly if the spot is changing in size, shape, color, or appearance. A changing spot is particularly important to have evaluated.

Another helpful warning sign is if one mole or spot looks noticeably different from the other spots on your skin. Not every unusual-looking mole is melanoma, and melanoma does not always follow the ABCDE pattern. At Calvert Dermatology, our dermatology providers can evaluate a spot that looks different, is changing, or simply concerns you.

What Increases My Risk of Melanoma?

Anyone can develop melanoma, but certain factors can increase your risk. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun is an important risk factor. A history of sunburns, particularly intense or blistering sunburns, can also increase risk. Indoor tanning exposes the skin to UV radiation and is associated with an increased risk of melanoma.

Other risk factors include having a personal or family history of melanoma, having many moles, or having certain unusual or atypical moles. Having a risk factor does not mean that you will develop melanoma, and some people who develop melanoma may have few or no known risk factors. Since melanoma can affect anyone, it is important not to assume that a concerning spot is harmless simply because you do not consider yourself to be at high risk.

How Is Melanoma Diagnosed?

If your dermatologist sees a spot that looks concerning, they may recommend a skin biopsy. During a biopsy, a small sample of skin or sometimes the entire suspicious spot is removed and sent to a pathologist for examination under a microscope. A biopsy is needed to confirm whether a suspicious spot is melanoma. If melanoma is diagnosed, information from the biopsy helps determine how deep the melanoma has grown and guides decisions about further treatment.

For many patients with melanoma that is confined to the skin, treatment involves a wide local excision. This means removing the melanoma along with an appropriate margin of normal appearing skin around it. The goal is to completely remove the melanoma while taking the amount of surrounding tissue recommended for that particular diagnosis. At Calvert Dermatology, we also coordinate additional care when it is appropriate. For some patients, a sentinel lymph node procedure may be recommended. This procedure helps doctors determine whether melanoma cells have spread to nearby lymph nodes. If this type of evaluation is needed, our team can coordinate a referral as part of your overall melanoma care.

When Should I See a Dermatologist?

You should make an appointment if you notice a new or changing mole or spot, particularly if it has an irregular shape, multiple colors, an unusual border, or is changing over time. You should also have a spot evaluated if it begins itching, bleeding, becoming painful, or developing a new bump or other noticeable change.

At Calvert Dermatology, we can examine concerning moles and other skin changes and help determine whether a biopsy or additional evaluation is appropriate. If you have a personal or family history of skin cancer or other risk factors for melanoma, your dermatologist can also discuss how frequently you should have your skin examined.

Bottom Line

Melanoma is a serious type of skin cancer but finding it early can make a significant difference. Get to know your skin, look for new or changing spots, and pay attention to the ABCDEs of melanoma. At Calvert Dermatology, we want our patients to feel comfortable asking questions about changes in their skin. If you have a concerning mole or are unsure whether a spot is normal, a dermatology evaluation can help determine what it is and whether any further treatment or testing is needed.

Regular skin examinations, skin self-checks, and protection from UV radiation are important parts of taking care of your skin. If you notice something new or changing, don't ignore it, having it checked is an important step in protecting your skin health.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can melanoma develop from a normal mole?

Yes. Melanoma can develop within an existing mole, but many melanomas develop as new spots on the skin. Paying attention to new or changing spots is important.

Does melanoma hurt or itch?

Melanoma may not cause any symptoms, especially in its early stages. Some melanomas can itch, bleed, or become painful, but you should not wait for discomfort before having a concerning spot checked.

Does every unusual mole need to be removed?

No. Many unusual-looking moles are not melanoma. Your dermatologist can examine a mole and determine whether it should be monitored or whether a biopsy is appropriate.

References

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