

Malignant Melanoma Explained

Do you love to worship the sun? Will you spend hours lying at the beach to perfect your glorious tan? Are you convinced that tanning beds are safer than natural UV rays? If you can answer "yes" to any of these questions, then you are at risk of developing malignant melanoma.

Skin cancer can affect the body in three different ways. The most dangerous of all forms of skin cancer affects the melanocytes. Skin cancer affecting the melanocytes manifests itself as a tumor, damaging the cells that produce melanin, a component in the body that helps to color your skin.

When skin cancer is diagnosed as malignant melanoma, you can expect to develop abnormal characteristics in the cells that determine the color of your skin, eyes and hair and the cells that control how easily you tan. One example of these abnormal characteristics is a mole on the skin that begins to change shape or color.

In some cases, malignant melanoma can affect the layer in the eye that falls just below the retina, called the choroids. Although this condition is not painful it can cause blurred vision and other problems with eyesight. A detached retina can also occur as a result of this problem. Malignant melanoma is the most common cause of eye tumors.

Less than one third of skin cancer malignant melanoma diagnoses appear in existing moles. Surprisingly, despite their unhealthy appearances, hairy moles hardly ever turn into malignant melanomas.

If you notice a mole on your body that is changing shape or color, have it checked by your doctor as soon as possible. As the cancerous tumor from the malignant melanoma grows deeper into the skin, there is an elevated risk of the cancer spreading to other parts of the body. Early detection and treatment can save your life.

The key to successful treatment of any cancer, including malignant melanoma, is early detection of the cancer symptoms. You should make a personal checkup part of your regular routine. Check the skin of your body regularly, at least once every 3 months and more frequently during the summer season.

When checking your skin, be on the lookout for moles that show these signs of concern:

- * Changes shape or size
- * Develops an irregular outline
- * Gets "taller" and sticks out more
- * Changes color or varies in different shades of brown, gray, red or blue
- * Develops a "halo" or another mole around the original one
- * Becomes itchy, painful or begins to bleed
- * Gets soft or begins to crumble

If you notice moles showing any of these symptoms, see a medical doctor right away.

Malignant melanoma most commonly presents in areas that receive the most exposure to the sun. The condition can, however, appear in any location on your body. People with fair skin are at risk of developing the disease on the upper part of the back. Women face an added risk of having malignant melanoma appear on the lower legs, between the knee and the ankle.

Rarely, individuals with dark skin will develop malignant melanoma. When the condition appears on those of darker complexions, it's usually on the soles of the feet or the palms of the hands. It is also possible to get malignant melanomas behind fingernails and toenails.

The key to avoiding the onset of malignant melanoma is to use sun protection whenever you're outdoors, and to avoid direct sunlight in the middle of the day whenever possible. Wearing tightly woven clothing that covers the body and blocks the sun is another good way to protect yourself and your children.

A few simple precautions are all it takes to help protect you and your family against developing malignant melanoma. Cover up in the sun, and avoid tanning beds. The effort you take today will mean a longer, healthier, cancer-free life.