

Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer. If it spreads (metastasizes) to the internal organs, it can be life-threatening. But in its early stage, it is almost 100 percent curable.

The Sun's Rays, A Trigger

Melanoma may be triggered by intense, intermittent sun exposure—the kind that may leave you sunburned. That has always been true, so why has the number of cases more than tripled in the past 20 years? People are now engaging in more outdoor activities than in the past, often wearing less clothing. Worse yet, more than a million Americans visit tanning salons every day, and the ultraviolet A and B rays emitted by the lamps are both extremely harmful.

The Heavy Hand Of Heredity

Heredity plays so large a part in melanoma that the term “melanoma family” has been coined. The risk is greatest if a close relative (mother, father, siblings or children) has had a melanoma.

How To Cut Your Risk

While you cannot change inherited traits, you can protect yourself from the sun with clothing, including a broad-brimmed hat, sunglasses and sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or greater. Seek the shade, and stay out of the sun as much as possible from 10 AM to 4 PM.

Half of all melanoma patients have unusual-looking atypical moles (also called dysplastic nevi). Be sure not to skip a single skin examination if you are in a melanoma family, have atypical moles or have a history of melanoma. Children in melanoma families should be checked by a physician from age 10 on.

Early Warning—Danger Ahead

Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer. In its advanced state, it can cause serious illness and even death. Fortunately, melanoma rarely strikes without warning. There are almost always signs that danger is lurking. Watch for them, because when melanoma is found early, it is almost always curable.

Your Skin Tells The Story

Moles, brown spots and growths on the skin are usually harmless—usually, but not always. Anyone who has more than 100 moles is at greater risk for melanoma. The first signs can appear in one or more of these moles. That's why it's so important to get to know your skin very well. Examine the skin all over your body once a month and have a physician check you over once a year.

The Melanoma Alphabet

The first five letters of the alphabet are a guide to the early warning signs of melanoma.

A stands for **ASYMMETRY**

B stands for **BORDER**

C for **COLOR**

D for **DIAMETER**

E for **EVOLVING** or changing

Learn these signs, and if you see any of them, schedule a visit to your doctor right away. But remember: These signs are not proof of melanoma. They only mean that you should be on your guard.

The photographs on the opposite pages compare benign (harmless) moles and malignant ones (early melanomas), according to the melanoma alphabet.

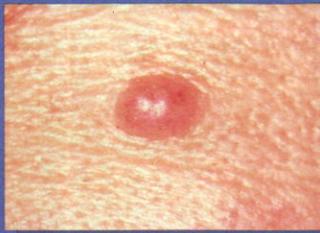
BENIGN

MALIGNANT

ASYMMETRY

This benign mole is not asymmetrical. If you draw a line through the middle, the two sides will match, meaning it is **symmetrical**.

A



If you draw a line through this mole, the two halves will not match, meaning it is **asymmetrical**, a warning sign for melanoma.

BORDER

A benign mole has **smooth**, even borders, unlike the one on the opposite page.

B



The **borders** of an early melanoma tend to be **uneven**. The edges may be scalloped or notched.

COLOR

Most benign moles are all **one color**—often a single shade of brown.

C



Having a **variety of colors** is another warning signal. A number of different shades of brown, tan or black could appear. A melanoma may also become red, white or blue.

DIAMETER

Benign moles usually have a **smaller diameter** than malignant ones.

D



Melanomas usually are **larger in diameter** than the size of the eraser on your pencil (1/4 inch or 6mm), but they may sometimes be smaller when first detected.

EVOLVING

Common, benign moles look the **same** over time. Be on the alert when a mole starts to evolve or change in any way.

E



When a mole is **evolving**, see a doctor. Any change—in size, shape, color, elevation, or another trait, or any new symptom such as bleeding, itching or crusting—points to danger.