

Early detection of skin cancer



Most skin cancers can be successfully treated if they are found early. However, left untreated, skin cancer can be fatal.

It's important to get to know your skin and what is normal for you so changes will be noticed quickly. Don't rely on an annual skin check to detect suspicious spots.

People should become familiar with their skin – not just sun-exposed areas. If you notice anything unusual, including any change in shape, colour or size of a spot, or the development of a new spot, visit your general practitioner (GP) as soon as possible.

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancers form when skin cells are damaged by ultraviolet (UV) radiation penetrating the skin.

There are three main types of skin cancer:

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC)

This is the most common, least dangerous form of skin cancer. BCCs grow slowly, usually on the head, neck and upper torso. They may:

- appear as a lump or dry, scaly area
- be red, pale or pearly in colour
- ulcerate as it grows, or appear as a sore that fails to heal completely or heals but then breaks down again.

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)

These are less common than BCC but may spread to other parts of the body if untreated. SCCs grow over some months and appear on skin most often exposed to the sun. They may:

- be a thickened, red, scaly spot
- bleed easily, crust and ulcerate.

Melanoma

Melanomas can be life-threatening in as little as six weeks if left untreated. Untreated, it can also spread to other parts of the body. Melanoma can also appear on skin not typically exposed to the sun, such as the inner thigh or underarm.

Use the ABCD rule as a guide while examining your skin:

- A = Asymmetry, look for spots that are asymmetrical (one half of the spot doesn't match the other).
- B = Border, look for spots with uneven borders. Melanoma is often flat with an uneven, smudgy outline.
- C = Colour, look for spots with an unusual or uneven colour. May be blotchy and more than one colour – brown, black, blue, grey or red.
- D = Diameter, look for spots that are larger than 7mm.

Nodular melanoma is a fast growing and aggressive form of melanoma that does not adhere to the ABCD criteria above. It is often red, pink, brown or black and feels firm to touch. Nodular melanoma grows quickly so if suspected, it is important to see your GP without delay.

Self-examination

Many skin cancers are self-detected or discovered by a family member. Cancer Council recommends that all adults, particularly those aged 40 and over, should:

- become familiar with their skin
- check all areas of their skin, including skin not normally exposed to the sun
- look for changes in shape, colour or size, or a new spot – if you notice anything unusual, see your doctor straight away
- ask others to check difficult-to-see areas, such as the back.

Photographs of any suspicious spots can be useful to record any changes over time. If you are worried about any skin changes, talk to your GP.

Who can diagnose and treat skin cancer?

Your GP will be able to examine your skin and diagnose and treat skin cancers, or will be able to refer you to a dermatologist. Although suspicious spots should be treated appropriately, harmless spots should not be removed unnecessarily.

GPs: Your GP can examine your skin and advise you of appropriate care. GPs are trained in diagnosing and treating skin cancers, which may include minor procedures. Cancer Council recommends that you first visit a GP to assess your skin.



Early detection of skin cancer

Dermatologists: If you have an unusual spot on your skin, your GP may treat it or refer you to a dermatologist – also known as a skin specialist. A dermatologist is a doctor who has completed additional training to specialise in diagnosing and treating skin diseases, including skin cancer.

To see a dermatologist you should get a referral from a GP. You can see a dermatologist without a GP referral but your Medicare rebate may be smaller.

Book your appointment as soon as you can. It may be some weeks before you can get an appointment. If your case is urgent, your GP should be able to arrange an early appointment. If you live in regional Victoria, there may not be a dermatologist in the area; however, many regional areas have visiting dermatologists. Your GP should be able to advise you.

Skin cancer clinics

There are many skin cancer clinics offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. General practitioners – not dermatologists – are more likely to operate skin cancer clinics. If you wish to see a dermatologist or get a second opinion, you may ask for a referral.

Cancer Council Victoria does not recommend any individual skin check service providers or skin cancer clinics.

Questions to ask

Whoever you decide to see, here are some questions you should ask.

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the person examining my skin?

If you are told you have skin cancer, ask:

- What type of skin cancer do I have (is it a common BCC or SCC or is it a potentially serious melanoma)?
- How extensive or advanced is the skin cancer?
- Do I need treatment immediately?
- What are the treatment options and the benefits and risks of the treatment options?
- What sun-protection is required? Ask about skin cancer prevention.
- What follow-up is required?
- What costs are involved? Ask how much each procedure will cost and how much is refundable through Medicare. If you are in a private health fund, check first if any of these procedures are covered by your plan.

Further information and resources

Consumer Guide to Skin Clinics and other information is available from sunsmart.com.au.

Melanoma and Common Skin Cancers patient booklets are also available from the Cancer Council on 13 11 20 or cancervic.org.au.

UV-protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at Cancer Council Victoria's shop or online at cancervic.org.au/store.

This information is based on current available evidence at the time of review. It can be photocopied for distribution.

Updated: October 2014