

Early detection of skin cancer



Cancer Council Victoria recommends that people check their skin regularly. Skin cancer is often visible in the early stages. If you notice any new spots or changes in the colour, size or shape of existing spots, see a general practitioner (GP).

Early detection is crucial. Skin cancer can be successfully treated if detected early. Cancer Council Victoria does not recommend any individual skin check service providers or skin cancer clinics.

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:

- is the most common and least dangerous form of skin cancer
- appears as a round or flattened lump or scaly area
- is red, pale or pearly in colour
- grows slowly, usually on the head, neck and upper torso, but may also appear on other parts of the body
- may form an ulcer as it grows.

Squamous cell carcinoma:

- is less common but more dangerous than basal cell carcinoma but not as dangerous as melanoma
- looks like a red scaly spot, usually thickened, which may bleed easily or ulcerate after some time
- may be tender to touch
- usually grows over weeks to months and may spread to other parts of the body if not treated promptly
- appears on parts of the body most often exposed to the sun.

Melanoma:

- is the most serious and least common form of skin cancer
- appears as a new spot, or an existing spot, freckle or mole that changes colour, size or shape
- usually has an irregular or smudgy outline and is more than one colour
- only rarely causes pain, bleeds or itches
- grows over weeks to months, anywhere on the body (not just in places that get a lot of sun)
- if untreated, cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body.

Self-examination

All adults should monitor their skin for changes. Unlike many other cancers, skin cancer is often visible, making it easier to detect in the early stages. Early detection is crucial if skin cancer is to be successfully treated.

Use a hand-held mirror to check the skin on your back and the back of your neck or ask someone else to look for you. Don't forget to check your armpits, inner legs, ears, eyelids, hands and feet. Use a comb to move sections of hair aside and inspect your scalp.

A B C D E: what to look for

If you notice any of the following, see your GP.

A: Asymmetry – One half of the spot doesn't match the other

B: Border – The edges are irregular, ragged, notched or blurred

C: Colour – The colour is not the same all over and may include shades of brown, black, red, white or blue

D: Diameter – The spot is larger than 6 mm across (about 1/4 inch) or is growing larger

E: Evolution and/or elevation – The spot may enlarge and a flat spot may become raised in a matter of a few weeks.

Also be aware of any mole or freckle that:

- changes over a period of months
- grows in size
- changes shape
- becomes mottled in colour
- has a persistent itch.

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

Who can diagnose and treat skin cancer?

All doctors can assess your risk and diagnose possible skin cancers. 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 well trained in diagnosing and treating skin cancers, which may include minor procedures. We recommend that you first visit a GP to assess your skin.

Dermatologists (skin specialists): 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 under Medicare your rebate will be smaller than if you had a referral.

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. Medical 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.

Many clinics offer digital technology to assist in examining skin spots. Remember that these are just tools and are only one part of the diagnosis made by the GP or dermatologist.

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

Questions to ask

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

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

If you are told you have skin cancer, ask:

2. What type of skin cancer do I have (is it a common low-grade skin cancer or is it a potentially serious melanoma)?
3. How extensive or advanced is the skin cancer?
4. Do I need treatment immediately?
5. What are the treatment options and the benefits and risks of the treatment options?
6. What sun protection is needed? Ask about skin cancer prevention.
7. What follow-up is required?
8. 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

Being SunSmart in Victoria, Consumers guide to skin clinics information sheet and other information visit sunsmart.com.au

Melanoma and Common Skin Cancers patient booklets are available from the Cancer Council Helpline 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.

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