



# Consumer guide to getting a skin check

**Get to know your skin and what is normal for you. If you notice any new skin spots or changes in the colour, size or shape of existing spots, see your general practitioner (GP) as soon as possible. Your GP should know your full medical history and be able to advise if you need a surveillance and management plan. Early detection is crucial. Most skin cancers can be successfully treated if found early.**

If you are at high risk of skin cancer you will need regular professional skin checks along with regularly monitoring your skin for changes. Some high-risk patients may be offered total body photography by their doctor.

People are considered high-risk if they:

- are male and over 50 years
- previously had skin cancer
- have many moles, especially if some are large or otherwise unusual
- have significant previous sun damage
- have a strong family history of skin cancer
- take immunosuppressive drugs
- have a genetic syndrome (melanoma passed on through family genes).

Cancer Council does not recommend the use of smartphone applications by consumers to self-diagnose skin cancer.

## Referral

Skin cancers can often be diagnosed and managed by GPs. If you have a skin cancer that requires further treatment, your GP may refer you to a specialist such as a dermatologist. You can also ask your GP to refer you to a specialist for a second opinion.

A dermatologist is a doctor who has completed significant additional training to specialise in diagnosing and treating skin disease, including skin cancer.

If you would like to see a dermatologist you should keep the following in mind:

- You should ask for a referral from a GP.
- Ask what fees may be charged and how much is covered by Medicare.
- There may be a long waiting list. If you have a spot of concern, your referring GP should organise an early appointment.
- If you live in regional Victoria there may not be a local dermatologist. However, many regional areas do have visiting dermatologists. Your GP should be able to advise you.

## Skin cancer clinics

Some people may go to a skin cancer clinic, rather than visit their GP. There are many skin clinics offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. Skin clinics are often operated by GPs. Some may offer bulk billing for some of their services.

Skin cancer clinics may not necessarily offer a higher level of expertise than your usual GP. Before deciding whether to go to a skin clinic, it is important you find out about the services offered and the expertise of the employees.

Mobile skin cancer clinics may visit some areas of Victoria. Ensure a dermatologist or specially trained doctor assesses your skin and reports back to your treating doctor. If you are at high risk of skin cancer, you should continue your individual surveillance activity as outlined by your doctor.

Cancer Council Victoria does not operate or endorse any skin check service providers or skin cancer clinics.

## Choosing a skin clinic

The following should help you decide if the clinic you are considering is one that suits your needs. There are four main points to consider when choosing and using a skin clinic:

## 1. Qualifications and experience of staff

Questions you should ask include:

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the person examining my skin?
- Will a qualified dermatologist check my skin?
- Are employees who perform skin checks members of any professional associations relevant to skin cancer, such as the Australasian College of Dermatologists or the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners?
- If there are photos taken of spots/moles, who will review these? They should be reviewed by a dermatologist. Note: Some clinics use computerised systems that scan digital images of lesions and skin spots. There is currently no evidence that computers are better than experienced doctors at diagnosing skin lesions.

## 2. Costs

Some clinics bulk bill for the first visit; others require payment up front. When you make your appointment ask if the clinic bulk bills and whether there might be other costs.

For example, if the person examining your skin believes you have a skin cancer, they may want to take a sample of the spot or remove the whole spot and have it sent for testing. This may involve extra charges that cannot be bulk billed.

Before you proceed:

- Ask for the full cost of each procedure and how much is covered through Medicare.
- Ask for all procedures and treatments, including removal of spots, to be explained.
- If you are in a private health fund, check first if the plan covers these procedures.
- If you can't afford a procedure at the moment, ask if it is urgent or if you can return when you can afford it. You may be able to have it done at lower cost at a public hospital or through your GP.
- If the clinic uses scanning technology, do they charge more for storing your images and for follow-up appointments?

## 3. Diagnosis and treatment

If you are told you have skin cancer, ask:

- What type of skin cancer do I have?
- How advanced is the skin cancer?
- Do I need treatment immediately?
- Is the person offering treatment well trained to do so?
- What are the treatment options and the benefits/risks of each treatment option?

- Will I be referred to a dermatologist if I have not seen one already?
- Will the clinic inform my GP of my diagnosis and any treatment I may have?
- What follow-up is required?
- What costs are involved? Ask how much each procedure will cost and how much is covered by Medicare. If you are in a private health fund, check if any of these procedures are covered by your plan.

## 4. Information and follow-up

Once you have had your skin examined, the clinic should also give information about skin cancer prevention and any follow-up you may need.

Ask the clinic for:

- results of any tests you have had
- information about skin cancer
- information about prevention and sun protection
- information about checking your own skin
- a reminder letter about future check-ups
- a record of your diagnosis and treatment to be sent to your GP.

You can also get information and support from the Cancer Council on 13 11 20.

## Things to remember

It is your right to seek a second opinion about any diagnosis and proposed treatment. A GP will refer you to a dermatologist if they feel it is necessary. You can arrange to see a dermatologist without a GP referral, but this will not generally be covered by Medicare.

Skin cancer, especially melanoma, should be treated promptly after diagnosis. Some cases of melanoma may require specialist care. If your GP suspects a melanoma, they may refer you to a local surgeon or a melanoma centre.

The risks for most treatments will be minor, but may include infection, pain and permanent scarring. Whoever plans your treatment should also provide follow-up care and information.

## More information and resources

*Early detection of skin cancer* information sheet and other information is available at [sunsmart.com.au](http://sunsmart.com.au).

*Understanding Melanoma* and *Understanding Skin Cancer* booklets are available at [cancervic.org.au](http://cancervic.org.au) or contact Cancer Council on 13 11 20.

UV-protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at [www.cancercouncilshop.org.au](http://www.cancercouncilshop.org.au).

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