

What Is Melanoma?

Melanoma is a type of cancer that affects the pigment-producing cells of the skin.

What Does Melanoma Look Like?

Melanoma most commonly appears as a dark brown or black, irregularly shaped mark that has a different appearance than a person's other moles or freckles. It may contain a mixture of light and dark colors and have jagged, asymmetrical borders. While most melanomas are tan or brown, some lack pigment and appear pink. Melanomas frequently change over time; they may grow in size, become more raised, develop color changes, and/or bleed. Although melanoma typically occurs on the skin, it can develop in other parts of the body, including in the eye or inside the mouth.

How Common Is Melanoma?

Melanoma accounts for only 1% of skin cancers but causes the majority of deaths from skin cancer. In the US in 2022, approximately 100 000 new cases of invasive melanoma were diagnosed, and there were 7650 deaths from melanoma.

Risk Factors for Melanoma

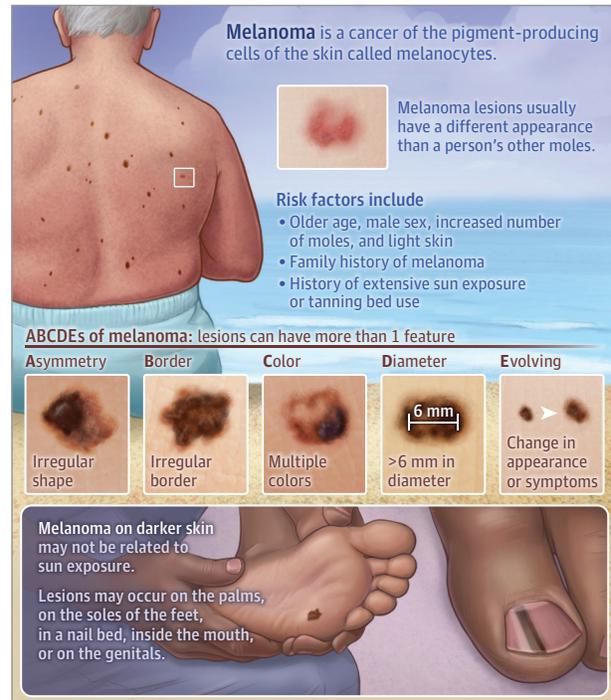
Major risk factors for melanoma include older age, male sex, increased number of moles, lighter skin tone, having a family member with melanoma, and history of extensive exposure to UV light from the sun or indoor tanning beds. However, young adults and people with darker skin tones can also develop melanoma. In people with darker skin tones, melanoma occurs more commonly in sun-protected areas, such as the palms and soles, and may not be associated with sun exposure.

Melanoma Diagnosis and Treatment

Skin biopsy is the standard way to diagnose melanoma. Noninvasive diagnostic tools such as magnification with dermoscopy can help determine which skin lesions should be biopsied.

Treatment typically involves surgery to remove the entire melanoma and a margin of surrounding normal skin. If melanoma has grown deep into the skin, a lymph node biopsy may be performed to assess whether melanoma has spread to the lymph nodes. If melanoma is deep or present in lymph nodes, imaging studies, such as computed tomography (CT) with or without positron emission tomography (PET), may be performed to determine whether the melanoma has spread (metastasized) to internal organs.

Melanomas that are at an advanced stage or unable to be removed by surgery may be treated with systemic medications, including certain drugs that help the immune system recognize cancer cells. Additional treatments for advanced melanoma may be available through a clinical trial.



What Is the Prognosis of Melanoma?

The prognosis of melanoma is primarily related to its stage, which is determined by the tumor size and depth of skin invasion, whether lymph nodes are involved, and whether melanoma has spread to other organs. The 5-year survival ranges from 99% for melanoma that has not spread beyond its initial location on the skin to 30% in patients with metastatic melanoma. Therefore, finding and treating melanoma early is important.

How Can Melanoma Be Detected?

Regular visual inspection of the skin, including in sun-protected areas such as the scalp, groin, nails, palms, and soles of the feet, is important for early diagnosis and treatment. Skin lesions that are concerning for melanoma should be promptly evaluated by a primary care physician or dermatologist.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

[National Cancer Institute](https://www.nationalcancerinstitute.gov)

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Published Online: March 3, 2023. doi:10.1001/jama.2022.24888

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Dr J. Y. Wang reported receipt of personal fees from Kiowa Kirin. No other disclosures were reported.

Source: Swetter SM, Tsao H, Bichakjian CK, et al. Guidelines of care for the management of primary cutaneous melanoma. *J Am Acad Dermatol.* 2019;80(1):208-250. doi:10.1016/j.jaad.2018.08.055