

Patient Information Leaflet: Melanoma

What is Melanoma?

Melanoma is a serious form of skin cancer that develops from melanocytes, the cells responsible for producing the pigment melanin that gives skin its colour. While melanoma is less common than other types of skin cancer, it is more aggressive and can spread to other parts of the body if not detected and treated early.

Causes:

The primary risk factor for melanoma is exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or tanning beds. Other contributing factors include:

- **Fair Skin:** Individuals with lighter skin types are at higher risk.
- **History of Sunburns:** Severe sunburn, especially during childhood, can increase the risk of developing melanoma.
- **Presence of Moles:** Having many moles or abnormal moles (dysplastic naevi) increases risk.
- **Family History:** A family history of melanoma or other skin cancers can predispose individuals.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Conditions or medications that compromise the immune system can increase the risk of melanoma.

Symptoms:

Melanoma can appear as a new pigmented (brown or black or shades of brown) on the skin or a change in an existing mole. Symptoms may include:

- A mole or growth that changes in size, shape, or colour.
- A mole that is asymmetrical (irregular in shape).
- A mole with irregular borders.
- A mole that is multi-coloured or has an uneven colour.
- A mole larger than 6 mm (about the size of a pencil eraser).
- Itching, tenderness, or bleeding in a mole.

Diagnosis:

Diagnosing melanoma typically involves:

- **Physical Examination:** A dermatologist will examine the skin for suspicious lesions.
- **Biopsy:** If a lesion is suspected to be melanoma, a biopsy will be performed to remove a portion or all of the mole for laboratory analysis.

Staging:

If melanoma is diagnosed, further tests may be conducted to determine the stage of the cancer, which indicates how far it has spread. Staging guides treatment options and prognosis and typically involves imaging studies and additional biopsies if necessary.

Treatment Options:

The treatment for melanoma depends on the stage, thickness, and characteristics of the tumour, as well as the patient's overall health. Common treatment options include:

1. **Surgery:**
 - **Wide Local Excision:** The primary treatment for early-stage melanoma involves surgically removing the tumour along with a margin of healthy tissue.
 - **Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy:** In some cases, nearby lymph nodes may be removed and examined to check for cancer spread.



Experts in Skin & Hair

2. **Immunotherapy:**
 - Medications that help boost the body's immune response against melanoma cells. Examples include checkpoint inhibitors such as pembrolizumab, nivolumab and ipilimumab.
3. **Targeted Therapy:**
 - For melanoma with specific genetic mutations (such as BRAF), targeted therapies like vemurafenib may be used to inhibit cancer cell growth.
4. **Chemotherapy:**
 - May be used in advanced cases when melanoma has spread to other parts of the body.
5. **Radiation Therapy:**
 - Sometimes used to target melanoma that has spread or to relieve symptoms in advanced stages.

Prevention:

To lower the risk of developing melanoma:

- **Sun Protection:** Use broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 50 or higher, wear protective clothing, and seek shade during peak sun hours (11 am to 3 pm).
- **Avoid Tanning Beds:** Stay away from indoor tanning to minimize UV exposure.
- **Regular Skin Checks:** Perform monthly self-examinations and schedule annual dermatological check-ups, especially if you have risk factors.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you notice any new or changing spots on your skin, including moles or lesions that exhibit any of the features listed under symptoms.
- If you experience persistent itching, tenderness, or bleeding in a mole.

Conclusion:

Melanoma is a serious but manageable form of skin cancer. Early detection through regular skin monitoring and prompt evaluation of suspicious lesions are key to successful treatment and management.

If you have questions or concerns about melanoma or your risk factors, please consult your dermatologist for further evaluation and guidance.

