

# Non-melanoma Skin Cancer

What you should know



**Irish  
Cancer  
Society**

# What is non-melanoma skin cancer?

There are two different types of skin cancer: **non-melanoma skin cancer** and melanoma skin cancer.

Non-melanoma skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland. Non-melanoma skin cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal skin cells, and tends to develop most often on the outer layer of the skin that is exposed to the sun.

Find out more about melanoma in our leaflet *Melanoma Skin Cancer: What you should know*.

## What increases my risk of non-melanoma skin cancer?

- **UV rays:** Frequent and intense exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from sunlight (or tanning lamps and sun beds) greatly increases your risk of non-melanoma skin cancer. Skin cancer usually forms in skin that has been exposed to sunlight, either over the long term or with short periods of intense sun exposure and burning. Skin cancer can also occur anywhere on the body.
- **Personal history:** Severe sunburn or blistering as a child or adolescent may increase your risk of developing non-melanoma skin cancer later in life. People who work outside such as farm workers, gardeners and building site workers are also at an increased risk of non-melanoma skin cancer.

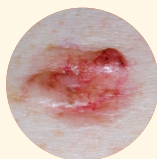
- **Sunbeds:** Sunbeds are as cancer-causing as tobacco and plutonium. Using a sunbed, even just once, can increase your risk of developing some skin cancers by as much as 67%. Regularly using sunbeds and using them from a young age increases your risk even more.
- **Unusual moles:** Your risk is increased if you have unusual moles or lots of moles.
- **Skin type and eye colouring:** You are more at risk if you are fair skinned with fair or red hair and blue, green or grey eyes.
- **Previous skin cancer or skin cancer in the family:** Being diagnosed with a non-melanoma skin cancer means that you have a higher risk of a second non-melanoma skin cancer. Being diagnosed with a melanoma also means that you have higher-than-average risk of getting a non-melanoma skin cancer. If your parent, brother, sister or children have had skin cancer, your risk is also higher.
- **Skin conditions:** People with certain skin conditions can be more likely to develop skin cancer. These include eczema and psoriasis.
- **Age:** The risk of developing non-melanoma skin cancer increases with age. But skin cancers can develop in younger people too.
- **Birthmarks:** Most birthmarks, such as the common port wine stains and strawberry marks, carry no risk of developing into a cancer. But some types of birthmarks can increase your risk.
- **Weakened immune system:** If you have a weakened immune system, your risk of skin cancer in the future is increased. For example, if you have had an organ transplant or have HIV/AIDS.
- **Previous radiotherapy:** People who have had radiotherapy can be at risk of skin cancer as much as 15 to 20 years later.
- **Chemicals:** Working with particular chemicals can increase your risk of skin cancer. These include coal tar, creosote, petroleum products like motor oil and arsenic.

**Risk factors increase your chance of getting non-melanoma skin cancer. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get non-melanoma skin cancer Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.**

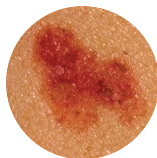
## What are the signs of non-melanoma skin cancer?

Skin cancers do not all look the same. They can appear in a number of ways including any of the following:

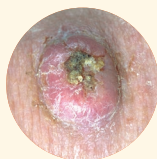
- A small lump that is smooth, pearly or waxy



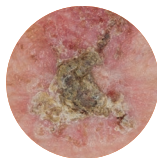
- A flat, red spot that is scaly, crusty or bleeding



- A lump that is firm, scaly or has a crusted surface, and may be sore



- Rough, scaly, irregular patches



These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out. Spots and sores are common. But if you have one that looks unusual, or broken skin (an ulcer) that doesn't heal within 4 weeks, get it checked. Also get any new or changing mark on your skin checked.

# What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your body that you are worried about, it's important to have them checked by your GP (family doctor). The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time. The sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely you are to recover from it.

## How is non-melanoma skin cancer diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be investigated some more, you will have more tests. Tests that can help to diagnose non-melanoma include:



**Skin examination:** A doctor examines the area closely to decide if the area of abnormal skin is harmless or not.



**Excision biopsy:** The area of abnormal skin is removed (usually with a local anaesthetic) and sent to the lab. It is then examined under a microscope to see if there are cancer cells. The biopsy should also remove normal-looking skin around the affected area. This is to make sure that no cancer cells are left behind. If done early, an excision biopsy often removes all the cancer, so you won't need further treatment.

**If you are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer, our booklet, *Understanding Non-melanoma Skin Cancer*, has more information. There is a different booklet available for patients diagnosed with melanoma, *Understanding Melanoma Skin Cancer*.**

## How can I reduce my risk of non-melanoma skin cancer?



Don't underestimate the power of the Irish sun!



Avoid getting burned by the sun



Do not use sunbeds



Regularly check your skin for changes

## Follow the SunSmart Code



SHADE



COVER UP

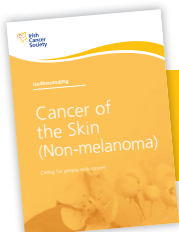


SUNGLASSES



SUNSCREEN

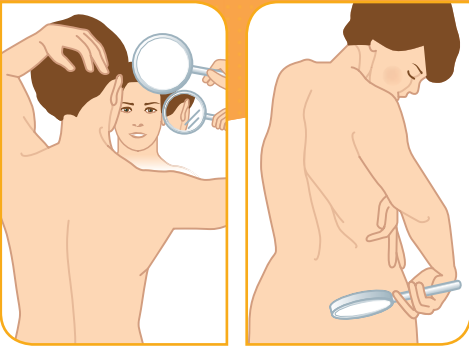
Remember to protect your skin, even on cool or cloudy days. See the end of this leaflet for tips on how to reduce your risk of cancer in general.



If you are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer, our booklet has more information.

## How can I check myself?

- 1 Examine your body front and back in the mirror, then your right and left sides with your arms raised
- 2 Bend your elbows and look carefully at your forearms, underarms and palms
- 3 Look at the backs of your legs and feet and the spaces between your toes and soles
- 4 Examine the back of your neck and scalp with a hand mirror. Part your hair for a closer look
- 5 Finally, check your back and buttocks with hand mirror



Take time today to check your body for changes that could be cancer. Photograph any suspicious skin changes to track any changes. Talk to your doctor if you notice anything unusual.

## Can I be screened for non-melanoma skin cancer?

Testing for non-melanoma skin cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening. There is no non-melanoma skin cancer screening programme in Ireland at present. If you are worried or feel you may be at risk, talk to your doctor.

# 12 ways to reduce your cancer risk



**Do not smoke**



**Avoid second-hand smoke**



**Be a healthy weight**



**Be physically active in everyday life**



**Have a healthy diet**



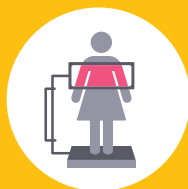
**Avoid alcohol**



**Avoid too much sun**



**Avoid pollutants**



**Get screened for cancer**



**Breastfeed your baby / Limit HRT**



**Get vaccinations: Hepatitis B for babies / HPV for girls**



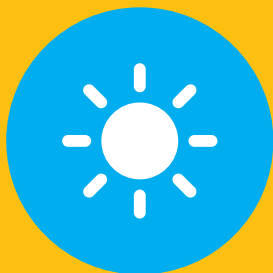
**Find out if you are exposed to radon gas in your area**



# Some facts about non-melanoma skin cancer



Over 10,000 people are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer every year in Ireland.



9 out of 10 cases of non-melanoma skin cancer are caused by the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays.



Non-melanoma skin cancer usually responds to treatment and rarely spreads to other parts of the body.



## How common is non-melanoma skin cancer?

There are over 10,000 new cases of non-melanoma skin cancer diagnosed each year in Ireland. It is the most common cancer in 15- to 44-year-olds

# For more information...

If you are worried or have questions about non-melanoma skin cancer or any cancer...



**Call our Cancer Nurseline**

**Freephone 1800 200 700**



or email [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)

for confidential advice, support and information.

Visit our Daffodil Centres where our nurses can give you advice about healthy lifestyles and reducing your risk of cancer. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email [daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie)

Visit our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for more information on melanoma skin cancer and ways to reduce your risk of cancer.

## Want to stop smoking?

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do to reduce your risk of cancer.

If you would like advice or support on quitting, call the HSE Quit Team on CallSave **1800 201 203**, Freetext **QUIT** to **50100** or visit [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie)



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