

# Non-melanoma Skin Cancer

What you should know

# What is non-melanoma skin cancer?

Non-melanoma skin cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal skin cells. It can develop anywhere on the body, but develops most often on the outer layer of the skin in places that are most exposed to the sun.

The 2 main types of non-melanoma skin cancer are squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), and basal cell carcinoma (BCC).

Non-melanoma skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland. It can usually be cured if it's found and treated early. That is why it's important to protect your skin and know what to look out for. This leaflet will show you how.

## Some facts about non-melanoma skin cancer

- ▶ Almost 1 in 4 cancers diagnosed in Ireland are non-melanoma skin cancer.
- ▶ Around 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 ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun, sunbeds or tanning booths.
- ▶ If caught early, non-melanoma skin cancer is usually resolved with surgery and rarely spreads to other parts of the body.

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

- ▶ **UV rays:** Skin cancer usually forms in skin that has been exposed to UV rays, either over the long term (like working outdoors) or with short periods of intense sun exposure and burning (like suntanning or using sunbeds). Remember that skin cancer can occur anywhere on the body.
- ▶ **History of sunburn:** Severe sunburn or blistering as a child or young adult may increase your risk of non-melanoma skin cancer later in life.
- ▶ **Sunbeds:** Sunbeds increase your risk of cancer as much as tobacco and plutonium. Using a sunbed, even once, can increase your risk of developing non-melanoma skin cancer by as much as 67%. Regularly using sunbeds and using them from a young age increases your risk even more.
- ▶ **Many moles or unusual moles:** Your risk is increased if you have lots of moles or if you have unusually shaped or large moles.
- ▶ **Skin and hair type and eye colouring:** You are more at risk if you are fair-skinned or freckled with fair or red hair, and if you have blue, green or grey eyes. If you are dark skinned, you have a lower risk, but you still need to protect your skin and check for changes.
- ▶ **Previous skin cancer or skin cancer in the family:** Your risk is higher if you have already had either non-melanoma or melanoma skin cancer. If your parent, brother, sister or children have had skin cancer, your risk is also higher.

- ▶ **Skin conditions:** People with skin conditions like eczema and psoriasis can be more likely to develop skin cancer. This is also true for people with rare inherited skin conditions, including xeroderma pigmentosum, Gorlin syndrome and epidermolysis bullosa, among others.
- ▶ **Chronic inflammation:** For example, leg ulcers, burns or scars can increase your risk.
- ▶ **Age:** The risk of developing non-melanoma skin cancer increases with age, but skin cancers can develop in younger people too.
- ▶ **Suppressed immune system:** If you are taking immunosuppression drugs, your risk of skin cancer in the future is higher. You may be taking these kinds of drugs after an organ transplant, or because you have HIV/AIDS, inflammatory bowel disease or another autoimmune condition.
- ▶ **Previous radiotherapy:** People who have had radiotherapy can be at higher 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. However, having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get non-melanoma skin cancer.**

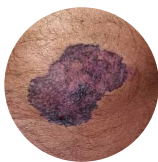
## What are the signs of non-melanoma skin cancer?

A new or changing mark on your skin can be a sign of skin cancer. So learn what's normal for you by checking your skin regularly.

If you spot any change in your skin that won't go away, go to your GP. Here are some examples of what to look for:



A small lump that is smooth, pearly or waxy.



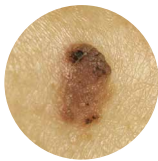
On dark skin, it may be brown or glossy black with a rolled border.



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 you should always get them checked.**

**Spots and sores are common. But if you have a spot or sore that looks unusual, or broken skin (an ulcer) that doesn't heal, get it checked by your GP. Also get any new or changing mark on your skin checked.**

## **How can I check myself?**

- ▶ Look at the front and back of your body in the mirror. Then look at your right and left sides with your arms up.
- ▶ Bend your elbows and look carefully at your forearms, underarms and palms.
- ▶ Look at the fronts and backs of your legs, the tops and bottoms of your feet and between your toes.
- ▶ Check the back of your neck and scalp with a hand mirror. Part your hair for a closer look.
- ▶ Use a hand mirror to look at any areas of your body that are hard to see. If you have trouble checking your skin, ask someone to help you.

**Take time to check your skin today and photograph anything new or different. Check the date the next time you check your skin, and keep track of any changes. Talk to your GP if you spot anything unusual.**

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

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

## What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any 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 found and treated, the more likely you are to recover from it.

## How is non-melanoma skin cancer diagnosed?

Your doctor can refer you to a specialist for more tests to see if the skin change is cancer. For example:

- ▶ **Skin examination:** A dermatologist looks closely at the abnormal skin with a magnifying tool called a dermatoscope to see if it is harmless or not.
- ▶ **Biopsy:** The abnormal skin is removed (usually with a local anaesthetic) and the cells are examined under a microscope to see if they are cancerous. If done early, a biopsy can remove all the cancer, so you won't need further treatment.

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



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

Everyone can take steps to reduce their risk of non-melanoma skin cancer no matter what skin tone you have.



Avoid any unnecessary UV exposure, like sunbathing, even if you're protecting your skin. Do not use sunbeds.



Avoid getting burned by the sun.



Regularly check your skin. If you find any changes, go to the doctor immediately.



Enjoy the sun sensibly and follow the SunSmart code.



# The SunSmart Code

Remember to protect your skin, even on cool or cloudy days.



**Seek shade:** Avoid the hottest sun of the day from 11am to 3pm.



**Cover up:** Wear a wide-brimmed hat and pick clothes that cover more: shirts with collars, three-quarter length or long sleeves and three-quarter length or long trousers or skirts.



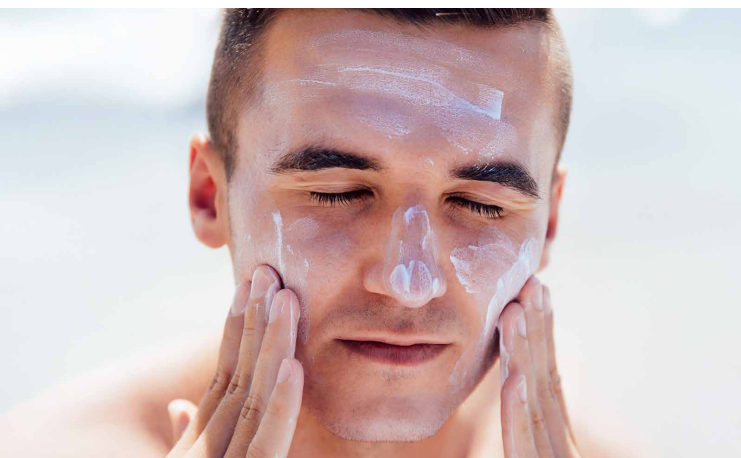
**Wear sunglasses:** Wear glasses with strong UV protection.



**Use sunscreen:** Use a broad-spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 for adults and 50 for children.



**Check the UV Index:** If it's 3 or more, be SunSmart! You can find the daily UV index online, on most weather apps, or in the newspaper.



## Contact us for more information or support

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



**Call our Support Line on Freephone  
1800 200 700.**



**Email [supportline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:supportline@irishcancer.ie)**

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



**Ask about a call in your language.**

Visit our **Daffodil Centres**, where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. 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 non-melanoma skin cancer and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

