Melanoma Skin Cancer
What you should know
What is melanoma skin cancer?

Melanoma is cancer in the skin cells that make melanin. Melanin gives your skin its colour and protects you from UV rays.

Melanoma usually starts on the surface of the skin, in moles or normal skin. Rarely melanoma can affect other parts of the body (for example, the eye or the lining of the nose or anus).
What increases my risk of melanoma?

- **A new or existing mole that has changed:** See also the ABCDE checklist.
- **Unusual moles and a family history:** Your risk is increased if you have unusual moles or lots of moles, and an immediate family member with a history of melanoma or skin cancer. By immediate family we mean a parent, brother/sister, or children.
- **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.
- **UV rays:** Frequent and intense exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from sunlight (or tanning lamps and sun beds) greatly increases your risk of melanoma. Being exposed to lots of sun on a beach holiday is more dangerous than daily sun exposure through outdoor work, etc.
- **Personal history:** Severe sunburn or blistering as a child or adolescent may increase your risk of developing melanoma later in life.
- **Sun beds:** People who have used a sunbed, even just once, have a 20% increased risk of melanoma. Regularly using sunbeds and using them from a young age increases your risk even more.
- **Age:** Melanoma affects all age groups but is most common between the ages of 30 and 60 years. The risk of developing it increases with age.
- **Weakened immune system:** If you have a weakened immune system, your risk of melanoma is greater. For example, if you have had an organ transplant or have HIV/AIDS.
- **Genetic skin disorders:** Your risk is greater if you have a genetic condition that makes your skin more sensitive to sunlight. For example, xeroderma pigmentosum.

Risk factors increase your chance of getting melanoma. Having a risk factor doesn’t mean you will get melanoma. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.
What are the signs of melanoma?

Do you have a mole that has changed in colour, size or shape? This ABCDE list helps you know what to look for:

A. Asymmetrical moles: A change in shape: one half is unlike the other

B. Border of a mole: A change in the edges: they look blurred or jagged

C. Colour of a mole: A change in the colour or differences within the mole: shades of tan, brown, black or even white, red or blue

D. Diameter (width): Any change in size. Most melanomas are larger than 6mm (the size of the top of a pencil) and keep growing

E. Evolving: Melanoma moles often change (evolve)

If you notice any of these signs, or have a mole that is tingling, inflamed, oozing, crusty or bleeding, contact your doctor without delay. Also, look out for a dark patch under your nail that gets bigger and wasn’t caused by an injury.

These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out. It is normal for moles to grow and develop during childhood and teenage years.
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 melanoma diagnosed?

If you have any unusual skin changes or other symptoms, visit your doctor (GP) without delay. If your GP suspects a melanoma, he or she should refer you immediately to a skin specialist, such as a dermatologist or a plastic surgeon.

Tests to diagnose melanoma include:

- **Skin examination:** A dermatologist (skin specialist) examines the area closely to decide if the mole is harmless or not.

- **Excision biopsy:** The suspicious mole is removed (usually with a local anaesthetic) and the cells are examined to see if they are cancerous. If done early, an excision biopsy often removes all the cancer, so you won’t need further treatment. The biopsy should also remove 2-3 mm of normal looking skin around the affected area.
How can I reduce my risk of melanoma?

- Avoid any unnecessary sun exposure, like sunbathing, even if you’re using protection
- Avoid getting burned by the sun
- Follow the SunSmart code and enjoy the sun sensibly
- Regularly check your skin. Use the ABCDE guide. If you find any changes go to the doctor immediately.

The SunSmart code

- **Seek shade**: Avoid the hottest sun of the day from 11am to 3pm
- **Cover up**: Wear a 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 SPF 15 or higher (SPF 30 or higher for children)
- **Check the UV Index**: If it’s 3 or more, be SunSmart!

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 melanoma, our booklet has more information.
Can I be screened for melanoma?

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

How can I check myself?

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

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

1. Do not smoke
2. Avoid second-hand smoke
3. Be a healthy weight
4. Be physically active in everyday life
5. Have a healthy diet
6. Avoid alcohol
7. Avoid too much sun
8. Avoid pollutants
9. Get screened for cancer
10. Breastfeed your baby / Limit HRT
11. Get vaccinations - Hepatitis B for babies / HPV for girls
12. Find out if you are exposed to radon gas in your area

Based on the European Code Against Cancer
Some facts about melanoma

Melanoma is different to non-melanoma skin cancer. Non-melanoma skin cancer is more common than melanoma.

Melanoma is one of the most serious forms of skin cancer but if spotted early, it is very treatable.

If not treated early, melanoma can spread to other parts of the body and cause serious medical issues.

How common is melanoma?

Around 880 people are diagnosed with melanoma in Ireland each year. Around 9,000 are diagnosed with non-melanoma skin cancer.
For more information…

If you are worried or have questions about melanoma skin cancer or any cancer…

Call our Cancer Nurseline
Freephone 1800 200 700
or email 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

Visit our website 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