

# Melanoma

## **What is skin cancer?**

Like all body tissues, the skin is made of tiny building blocks called cells. These cells can sometimes become cancerous, for example from exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

The top layer of skin contains three different types of cells: basal cells, squamous cells and melanocytes.

Skin cancers are named after the type of cell they start from. These are basal cell cancer, squamous cell cancer and melanoma.

The most serious skin cancer is melanoma but it is the least common and can be successfully treated if caught early.

## **What is melanoma?**

Melanoma is a form of cancer that starts from the melanocytes, the cells in the skin that produce melanin, the skin pigment or colour. These cells are the cause of bumps and moles on the skin and produce the brown colour of a suntan.

Melanoma can occur anywhere on the skin, even on the soles of the feet.

Melanocytes in the eye, nervous system and mucous membranes (e.g. lining of the mouth and nasal passages) can also become cancerous. These types of melanoma are rare.

Melanoma grows quickly. If it is not treated, it may spread to the lower layer of skin, where cancer cells can break off and are carried to other parts of the body.

## **What causes melanoma?**

Melanoma and other skin cancers generally develop because of overexposure to UV radiation from the sun and other sources such as tanning machines in solariums.

Melanoma seems to be related to short intense episodes of sunburn, particularly during childhood, as well as long-term exposure to UV radiation over a number of years. Also, if someone in the family has melanoma, there is a slightly greater chance that other family members may get it.

Each time your unprotected skin is exposed to UV radiation, it changes the structure of the cells and what they do. Overexposure to UV radiation permanently damages the skin and the damage will worsen with more UV radiation.

The most important years for sun protection are during childhood. Sunburn and overexposure to UV radiation during these years greatly increase the chance of getting melanoma.

**How common is melanoma?**

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. One in two Australians will develop some form of skin cancer during their lifetime. Each year about 220 people in Tasmania are diagnosed with melanoma.

Melanoma is more common in people with fair complexions as their skin pigment offers less protection against UV radiation than people with darker skin (for example, Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders).

Melanoma is diagnosed most often in older adults, but it also occurs in younger adults and occasionally in teenagers.

It is rarely seen in children, although it may begin to develop in children who are overexposed to UV radiation.

Adults with many moles (more than 10 on the arms and more than 200 on the body) are at higher risk and should be checked regularly by their GP.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding melanoma* on [www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof\\_patient.php](http://www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php)

**Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20**