



Melanoma Fact Sheet

The Disease

- Melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer, is characterized by the uncontrolled growth of pigment cells (melanocytes) that produce skin color.¹
- Melanoma usually develops in the skin (cutaneous melanoma), but may also occur in the:²
 - Eyes (ocular or intraocular melanoma)
 - Membrane covering the brain and spinal cord (meninges)
 - Digestive tract
 - Lymph nodes
 - Other areas where melanocytes are found
- Most melanomas (more than 70 percent) begin in or near an existing mole or dark spot on the skin. Some "birthmarks" (congenital moles) can also develop into melanomas.¹

Key Statistics

- Cancer of the skin (nonmelanoma and melanoma skin cancers combined) is the most common type of cancer, accounting for more than 50 percent of all cancers.³
- In some parts of the world, especially among Western countries, melanoma is becoming more common every year. In the United States, for example, the percentage of people who develop melanoma has more than doubled in the past 20 years.⁴
- Melanoma accounts for about four percent of skin cancer cases but causes about 79 percent of skin cancer deaths.³
- It is estimated that about 55,000 new melanomas were diagnosed in the United States during 2004.³
- Nearly 8,000 people in the United States were expected to die of melanoma during 2004.³
- The most recent statistics (from 2002) showed that about 160,000 people worldwide were diagnosed with melanoma, and more than 40,000 of them died from the disease.⁵
- About five percent of patients with melanoma will develop metastases from the original tumor.⁶
- There has been a steady increase in melanoma incidence worldwide, primarily attributed to increased sun exposure.⁵

Risk Factors & Symptoms

Risk factors for melanoma include:^{1,3}

- Dysplastic nevi (atypical mole)
 - Fair skin
 - Freckles
 - Family or personal history
 - Weakened immune system
 - Too much exposure to ultraviolet rays, radiation and sunburn
 - Age (approximately half of all melanomas occur in people over the age of 50)
 - Gender (men are more likely to develop melanoma than women)
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- The first sign of melanoma is often a change in the size, shape, color, or feel of an existing mole.²
 - Most melanomas have a black or blue-black area.²
 - Melanoma also may appear as a new, black, abnormal or "ugly-looking" mole.²

Treatment

- Melanoma can be treated successfully if detected at an early stage. If not, it may spread to other parts of the body and result in death.¹
- Treatment is based on the age and general health of the patient as well as on the stage of the disease.⁷
- Surgery is currently the first line of treatment for any stage of melanoma. In later stages, surgery is generally followed by chemotherapy, radiation therapy or immunotherapy (Interferon and Interleukin).⁷
- Melanoma that has spread to other parts of the body (metastatic) is rarely curable with standard therapy.⁴
- Only 13 percent of patients with stage IV and 44 percent with stage III are alive five years after the diagnosis.^{6,8}

References:

¹ American Melanoma Foundation; ² HealthNewsflash.com; ³ American Cancer Society; ⁴ National Cancer Institute; ⁵ J. Ferlay, F. Bray, P. Pisani and D.M. Parkin. GLOBOCAN 2002: Cancer Incidence, Mortality and Prevalence Worldwide IARC CancerBase No. 5. version 2.0, IARC Press, Lyon, 2004; ⁶ Oncolink.com; ⁷ Melanoma.com; ⁸ Pond R. Kelemen, MD, Leslie A. Wanek, PhD, and Donald L. Morton, MD: Annals of Surgical Oncology, 6(2):139-143, 1999, The Society of Surgical Oncology, Inc.

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