Melanoma: What You Need to Know

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Melanoma is the deadliest form of skin cancer. Rates of melanoma are rising rapidly, especially in younger people. In fact, cases of melanoma have tripled in the last 30 years, at a time when cancer rates for other common cancers have declined.

Do you know the answer to these top ten questions people ask about melanoma?

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a cancer of pigment producing-cells called melanocytes. These cells give each of us our unique skin color. Most melanomas originate on sun-exposed skin, though they can also develop in other parts of the body containing melanocytes, including the eyes and sun-shielded locations like mucous membranes or palms, soles, or under fingernails.

The ability to spread widely to other parts of the body is a unique characteristic of melanoma compared to the more common skin cancers, basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma which only rarely do so. This characteristic makes melanoma the deadliest of all skin cancers.

How common is melanoma?

Melanoma of the skin is one of the most common cancers in the United States — among the top 10 causes of new cancer cases.

- In the United States each year, more than 91,270 Americans are diagnosed with melanoma — an average of one person every eight minutes.
- About 1 in 50 Americans will be diagnosed with melanoma in their lifetime.
- The incidence of melanoma has more than doubled in the last 30 years.

Click here to for more melanoma statistics.

How serious is melanoma?

Melanoma is a very serious cancer. This year, more than 91,000 people in the United States will be diagnosed with melanoma and more than 9,000 are expected to die due the disease. Most people will be treated successfully if melanoma is found early, but even some diagnosed with an early melanoma will unfortunately relapse.

What is the survival rate for melanoma?

Melanoma survival rates provide the proportion of people with a particular stage of melanoma who are alive after a predetermined amount of time, normally five or ten years, after diagnosis. While these numbers can be helpful to you in making treatment and other decisions — they do not dictate how long you will live. They are not “your” numbers.

Most of the time, you will see these numbers written as five-year survival rate. So, a 95 percent five-year survival rate can be understood as ninety five out of 100 people will be alive five years after diagnosis.

Keep in mind that these numbers are accurate for a group of people, but they don’t provide a complete picture for any one individual. Also, the data required to determine these rates is complicated, and the people the data are based on were treated five to ten years ago when treatments were different from what is available today. Melanoma treatments have improved significantly with the addition of immunotherapy and targeted therapy. These numbers are only beginning to reflect these advancements.

Five-Year Survival Rate by Melanoma Stage:

- Localized Melanoma: Stage 0, Stage 1, and Stage 2: 98.5 percent
- Regional Melanoma: Stage 3: 62.9 percent
- Metastatic Melanoma: Stage 4: 19.9

Who gets melanoma?

Anyone can get melanoma, but it is more common in people born with light skin, light-colored hair, and blue or green eyes. While melanoma is less common among people born with darker skin, anyone can develop melanoma and in those individuals it is often detected at later or advanced stages.

The average American with melanoma is 63 years old, but approximately 2 percent of all melanoma is diagnosed in people under the age of 20. It is about twice as common in men than women.

What causes melanoma?

Melanoma forms when something goes wrong in the pigment producing-cells called melanocytes that give your skin color. When the DNA in these cells become damaged, they may begin to grow out of control.

Experts believe that 90 percent of all melanomas are caused by ultraviolet radiation from the sun or indoor tanning devices. They can tell that by measuring the type and amount of DNA damage in many melanoma tumor samples. Some melanomas form in places that aren't exposed to sunlight, indicating that other factors can contribute toward melanoma in some cases.

How do I protect myself from melanoma?

Over 90 percent of all skin cancer is caused by exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun or indoor tanning devices. Americans can dramatically reduce their risk of skin cancer by:

- Not burning or tanning intentionally — no tan is a safe tan;
- Seeking shade during peak times of the day;
- Wearing sun-protective clothing;
- Generously applying sunscreen (remember to reapply every two hours); and
- Using extra caution near water, snow, and sand because the sun is reflected back up from the ground!

Click here to for more sun safety and melanoma prevention tips.

What does melanoma look like?

Melanomas can vary greatly in how they look. Many show all of the ABCDE features. However, some sub-types of melanoma may have only one or two of the ABCDE features or even none at all.

In more advanced melanoma, the texture of the spot may change. The surface of the skin may break down, be itchy, tender, painful, or look scraped.

Often the first sign of melanoma is a change in the shape, color, size, or feel of an existing mole. However, melanoma may also appear as a new mole or a rapidly enlarging bump.

If you notice a change on your skin, see your doctor. Don't wait.

How is melanoma treated?

During its early stages, melanoma can be successfully treated with surgery alone. Other types of cancer treatment, including immunotherapy and targeted therapy, are more effective for advanced stages of melanoma.

Click here to learn more about melanoma treatment options.

What about melanoma clinical trials?

Clinical trials are research studies involving human volunteers that are designed to answer specific questions about new treatments for melanoma. Clinical trials offer patients access to new treatment approaches that might be more beneficial than anything currently approved by the FDA. In addition, clinical trials drive our understanding of melanoma forward, improving future treatment options for all patients and offering patients a way to contribute to the greater good. Lack of enrollment in clinical trials is one of the biggest obstacles to bringing new therapies to market and today there are around 400 melanoma-focused clinical trials testing new treatment approaches that currently recruiting patients.

Click here to learn more about melanoma clinical trials.

What is the Melanoma Research Alliance doing to fight melanoma?

The Melanoma Research Alliance is the largest, non-profit funder of melanoma research worldwide. To date, we have directly funded over $100 million in innovative grants to improve prevention, detection, and treatment of melanoma. We have also leveraged an additional $90 million in outside funds for research.

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