



## When Should I Worry About a Mole?

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Most people have moles. They are frequently benign, though they may warrant removal if they cause discomfort or look abnormal.

Certain moles, however, can potentially pose serious health concerns and warrant a visit to the dermatologist's office. According to the American Academy of Dermatology, approximately 20 to 40 percent of melanomas result from abnormal moles.

Melanomas are the most dangerous form of skin cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that 62,480 people will be diagnosed with melanomas in 2008, and 8,420 will die. When discovered and treated early, the survival rate is 95 percent. In the more advanced stages, the odds of survival diminish greatly.

Melanomas differ from most moles in appearance and shape. When performing an examination of your skin for potential melanomas, you should consider the following criteria: asymmetry, irregular borders, multiple colors, or a mole larger than a pencil eraser. Also, any mole that is growing or changing should cause concern. You should also seek medical advice if your moles itch, bleed, or become painful. Displaying one or more of these symptoms doesn't automatically translate to melanoma; a wide range of skin-related issues share many of the same characteristics.

It is also important to understand the risk factors for developing melanoma including:

- ❑ Prolonged exposure to UV rays, including those found in tanning beds.
- ❑ Sunburn, particularly if the burn is severe and blistering. Your risks of developing a melanoma increase exponentially at any age with excessive sun exposure.
- ❑ Family history.
- ❑ Fair skin. Those with red hair or blue eyes are typically at greater risk as well.
- ❑ Having more than 50 moles on your body.
- ❑ Previous melanoma diagnosis.

Surgery is often the method of treatment for a melanoma. The procedure frequently takes place during a quick in-office visit if the melanoma is found in the early stages. Once confirmed, the melanoma and a small margin of surrounding tissue are excised. This tissue is then examined to determine if the melanoma has been completely removed.

You should schedule a thorough skin examination on an annual basis, or more frequently if you have a history of melanoma. If you have a suspicious mole, you should make an appointment for a proper examination immediately.

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