

Skin Changes

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Topic Overview

Most skin bumps, spots, growths, and moles are harmless. Colored skin spots, also called pigmented lesions (such as freckles, moles, or flesh-colored skin spots), or growths (such as warts or skin tags) may be present at birth or develop as the skin ages.

Most skin spots on babies will go away without treatment within a few months. Birthmarks are colored marks on the skin that are present at birth or develop shortly after birth. They can be many different sizes, shapes, and colors, including brown, tan, black, blue, pink, white, red, or purple. Some birthmarks appear on the surface of the skin, some are raised above the surface of the skin, and some occur under the skin. Most birthmarks are harmless and do not need treatment. Many birthmarks change, grow, shrink, or disappear. There are many types of birthmarks, and some are more common than others. For more information, see the topic Birthmarks.

Cause of skin changes

Acne is a common skin change that occurs during the teen years and may last into adulthood. Acne may be mild, with just a few blackheads (comedones), or severe, with large and painful pimples deep under the skin (cystic lesions). It may be present on the chest and back as well as on the face and neck. Boys often have more severe outbreaks of acne than girls. Many girls have acne before their periods that occurs because of changes in hormone levels. For more information, see the topic Acne.

During pregnancy, dark patches may develop on a woman's face. This is known as the "mask of pregnancy," or chloasma, and it usually fades after delivery. The cause of chloasma is not fully understood, although experts think that increased levels of pregnancy hormones cause the pigment-producing cells in the skin (melanocytes) to produce more pigment. You can reduce skin pigment changes during pregnancy by using sunscreen and staying out of the sun.

Actinic keratosis and actinic lentiginos are types of colored skin spots that are caused by too much sun exposure. Although these spots are not skin cancers, they may mean that you have an increased chance of getting skin cancer, such as squamous cell skin cancer or a type of melanoma.

You may have an allergic reaction to a medicine that causes a skin change, or you may develop a skin reaction when you are out in the sun while you are taking a medicine (this is called photosensitivity). Rashes, hives, and itching may develop, and in some cases may spread to areas of your skin that were not exposed to the sun (photoallergy). For more information, see the topic Allergic Reaction.

Skin changes can also be caused by:

- Autoimmune diseases, such as lupus and scleroderma.
- Reactions to a bite, such as Lyme disease from a tick bite. For more information, see the topic Lyme Disease.
- Bacterial skin infections, such as impetigo and cellulitis.
- Viral infections, such as chickenpox, shingles, or fifth disease.
- Liver problems, such as hepatitis, which may cause your skin and the whites of your eye to turn yellow (jaundice).

Common skin changes

Some common skin growths include:

- **Moles.** Most people have between 10 and 40 moles. You may continue to form new moles until you are in your 40s. Moles may change over time. They can gradually get bigger, develop a hair, become more raised, get lighter in color, fade away, or fall off.
- **Skin tags.** These are harmless growths that appear in the skin folds on the neck, under the arms, under the breasts, or in the groin. They begin as small fleshy brown spots and may grow a small stalk. Skin tags never turn into skin cancer.
- **Seborrheic keratoses.** These skin growths are almost always harmless. They are found most often on the chest or back; occasionally on the scalp, face, or neck; and less commonly below the waist. They begin as slightly raised tan spots that develop a crusty appearance like that of a wart. For more information, see the topic Seborrheic Keratosis.

Treatment of a skin change depends on what is causing the skin change and what other symptoms you are having. Moles, skin tags, and other growths can be removed if they become irritated, bleed, or cause embarrassment.

Skin cancer

While most skin changes are normal and occur with aging, some may be caused by cancer. Skin cancer may start as a growth or mole, a change in a growth or mole, a sore that does not heal, or irritation of the skin. It is the most common form of cancer in North America.

Skin cancer destroys skin cells and tissues and can spread (metastasize) to other parts of the body. The three most common types of skin cancer are basal cell cancer, squamous cell cancer, and melanoma. See a picture of the ABCDEs of melanoma (See figure 1 in appendix) .

Early detection and treatment of skin cancer can help prevent problems. Treatment depends on the type and location of the growth and how advanced it is when it is diagnosed. Surgery to remove the growth will help determine what treatment will be needed. For more information, see the topics Skin Cancer, Melanoma and Skin Cancer, Nonmelanoma.

Check your symptoms to decide if and when you should see a doctor.

Home Treatment

Most bumps, spots, growths, or moles do not need any type of home treatment. But the following measures may be helpful:

- Keep the area clean and dry. Wash with a mild soap and warm (not hot) water. Do not scrub.
- Avoid irritating the area.
 - Do not squeeze, scratch, or pick at the area.
 - Leave the area exposed to the air whenever possible.
 - Adjust your clothing to avoid rubbing the bump or spot, or cover it with a bandage.
- Conceal a mole or birthmark if you are embarrassed by how it looks. Many cosmetics are designed for this purpose.
- Shower after swimming or using a hot tub to rinse off chlorine or salt water. Use a moisturizer after showering.
- Perform a skin self-exam (See figure 2 in appendix) to learn about your skin. This will help you spot new skin growths.
- Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids each day. For more information, see the topic Healthy Eating.

Symptoms to watch for during home treatment

Call your doctor if any of the following occur during home treatment:

- Signs of a skin infection develop.
- A mole or colored skin spot:
 - Bleeds or forms an ulcer.
 - Changes in size, shape, or texture.

- Becomes sensitive, itchy, or painful.
 - Symptoms do not improve, become more severe or frequent, or don't go away.
-

Prevention

Most noncancerous skin bumps, spots, and growths can't be prevented. But there are steps you can take to help prevent some skin problems:

Measures to decrease your risk of infection

- Keep your skin clean.
 - Wash with lukewarm water and a mild soap or cleanser. Do not use soaps and skin cleansers that contain irritating substances.
 - Rinse your skin thoroughly after you wash it, and gently pat it dry.
 - Wash soon after participating in activities that cause you to sweat.
- Do not use skin care products that contain oil, because they may clog your pores. Instead, use water-based skin care products. Read the labels on products, and look for the terms oil-free or hypoallergenic.
- Do not squeeze, scratch, drain, or puncture a painful lump. Doing this can irritate or inflame the lump, push any existing infection deeper into the skin, or cause severe bleeding.
- Prevent irritation by wearing soft, cotton clothing or moleskin under sports equipment (if possible). Parts of equipment (such as chin straps) can rub your skin and irritate it. Adjust your clothing so that belts and straps or elastic from bras or underwear do not rub against your skin.

Prevent skin cancer

Most skin cancer can be prevented by protecting your skin (See Skin Cancer: Protecting Your Skin in appendix) from the sun. You may decrease your chances of developing skin cancer and help prevent wrinkles by avoiding sun exposure and using sunscreen protection. Be sure to prevent sun exposure in children and older adults too.

Do not use tanning booths to get a tan. Artificial tanning devices can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer.

For more information on warts, see the topic Warts and Plantar Warts.

For more information on how to help prevent acne, see the topic Acne.

Preparing For Your Appointment

To prepare for your appointment, see the topic Making the Most of Your Appointment.

You can help your doctor diagnose and treat your condition by being prepared to answer the following questions:

- How long have you had the skin spot?
- Has your skin spot changed? If so, how?
- Where did it first appear? Where is it now?

- What other symptoms, such as itching or pain, do you have?
 - Are there any other family members who have the same skin changes or a history of skin changes?
 - Is there anything new or different that you have been exposed to, such as a medicine, personal care products, products at work, or things related to sports or hobbies?
 - What home treatment have you tried? How did it work?
 - Have you ever been treated for a skin condition like this in the past?
 - What prescription and nonprescription medicines do you take?
 - Do you have any health risks?
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Related Information

- Blisters
 - Finger, Hand, and Wrist Problems, Noninjury
 - Insect Bites and Stings and Spider Bites
 - Male Genital Problems and Injuries
 - Mouth Problems, Noninjury
 - Rectal Problems
 - Sexually Transmitted Infections
 - Swollen Glands, Hernias, and Other Lumps Under the Skin
 - Tick Bites
 - Toe, Foot, and Ankle Problems, Noninjury
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Credits for Skin Changes

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Appendix

Introduction

Excessive exposure to the sun and its ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause skin cancer. You can reduce your risk for skin cancer by:

- Protecting your skin, and that of your family members, from UV radiation.
 - Performing frequent skin self-examinations (See figure 2 in appendix) .
 - Finding out whether you have an increased risk for melanoma and other skin cancers.
-

How do I protect my skin from UV radiation and skin cancer?

You can take steps to protect your skin from UV radiation. While sunscreen plays a vital role in protecting your skin from UV radiation, it can't prevent skin damage if you are exposed to the sun's rays for long periods of time. Experts recommend that you use multiple methods to fully protect your skin.

Preventing skin cancer isn't always possible. But being alert for new spots or skin growths and having your doctor check your skin regularly may help find skin cancer early when it can be more easily treated.

Protect your skin

- Stay out of the sun during the peak hours of UV radiation, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wear protective clothing:
 - Wide-brimmed hats that protect the face and neck
 - Tightly-woven clothing made of thick material, such as unbleached cotton, polyester, wool, or silk
 - Dark clothing with dyes added that help absorb UV radiation
 - Loose-fitting long-sleeved clothing that covers as much of the skin as possible
 - Clothing that has sun protection factor (SPF) in the fabric that does not wash out
- Wear sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, summer and winter, on both cloudy and clear days.
- Apply sunscreen that blocks both UVA and UVB radiation to all exposed skin, including lips, ears, back of the hands, and neck. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going in the sun, and reapply it every 2 hours and after swimming, exercising, or sweating.
- Wear wraparound sunglasses that block at least 99% of UVA and UVB radiation.
- Be careful when you are on sand, snow, or water, because these surfaces can reflect 85% of the sun's rays.
- Avoid artificial sources of UVA radiation, including sunlamps and tanning booths. Like the sun, they can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer.

A child's skin is more sensitive to the sun than an adult's skin and is more easily burned. Babies younger than 6 months should always be completely shielded from the sun. Children 6 months and older should have their skin protected from too much sun exposure.

Know the ABCDEs of early detection

Skin cancer can be cured if found and treated early. If it is not discovered or treated until too late, it can spread throughout the body and may be fatal. Skin cancer often appears on the trunk of men and on the legs of women. Learn your ABCDEs (See figure 1 in appendix) , the changes in a mole or skin growth that are warning signs of melanoma:

- Asymmetry (See figure 3 in appendix) : One half doesn't match the other half.
- Border irregularity (See figure 4 in appendix) : The edges are ragged, notched, or blurred.
- Color (See figure 5 in appendix) : The pigmentation is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown, and black are present. Dashes of red, white, and blue add to the mottled appearance. Color may spread from the edge of a mole into the surrounding skin.
- Diameter (See figure 6 in appendix) : The size of the mole is greater than 6 mm (0.2 in.), or about the size of a pencil eraser.

- Evolution (See figure 7 in appendix) : There is a change in the size, shape, symptoms (such as itching or tenderness), surface (especially bleeding), or color of a mole.

Get to know your skin

Skin cancer, including melanoma, is curable if spotted early. A careful skin exam may identify suspicious growths that may be cancer or growths that may develop into skin cancer (precancers).

- Examine your skin (See figure 2 in appendix) once every month. Get to know your moles and birthmarks. And look for any abnormal skin growth and any change in the color, shape, size, or appearance of a skin growth.
- Check for any area of skin that does not heal after an injury.
- Have your doctor check your skin during any other health exams. Most experts recommend having your skin examined regularly.
- Bring any suspicious skin growths or changes in a mole to the attention of your doctor.

Credits for Skin Cancer: Protecting Your Skin

By Healthwise Staff

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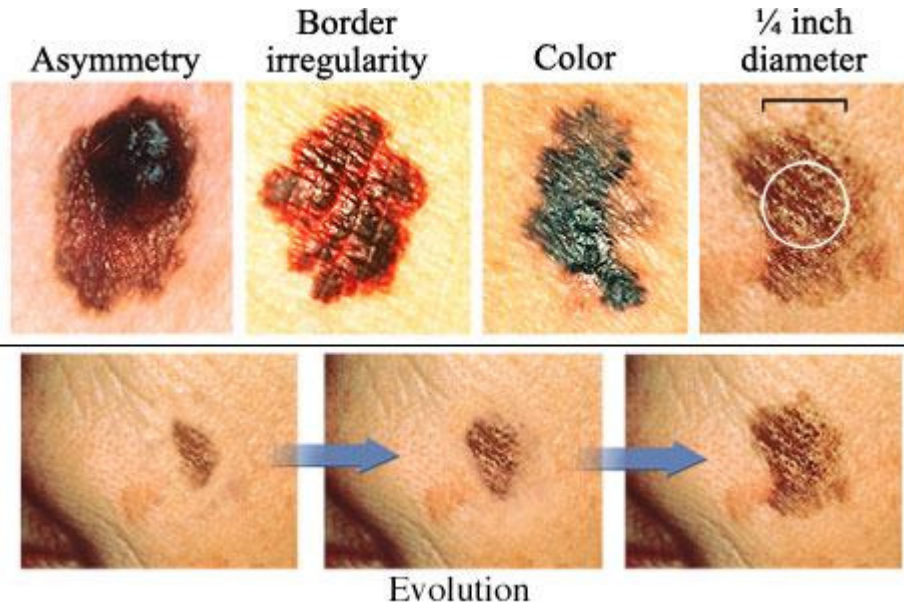
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Current as of May 3, 2017

Topic Images

Figure 1

ABCDEs of Melanoma Skin Cancer



Source: NCI Visuals Online. Skin Cancer Foundation.
<http://visualsonline.cancer.gov/about.cfm>

The ABCDEs of melanoma skin cancer are:

- **Asymmetry.** One half doesn't match the appearance of the other half.
- **Border irregularity.** The edges are ragged, notched, or blurred.
- **Color.** The color (pigmentation) is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown, and black are present. Dashes of red, white, and blue add to a mottled appearance.
- **Diameter.** The size of the mole is greater than 1/4 inch (6 mm), about the size of a pencil eraser. Any growth of a mole should be evaluated.
- **Evolution.** There is a change in the size, shape, symptoms (such as itching or tenderness), surface (especially bleeding), or color of a mole.

Figure 2

Skin Self-Examination



A skin self-exam is used to identify suspicious growths that may be cancer or growths that may develop into skin cancer (precancers). Adults should examine their skin once every month. Look for any abnormal skin growth or any change in the color, shape, size, or appearance of a skin growth. Check for any area of injured skin (lesion) that does not heal.

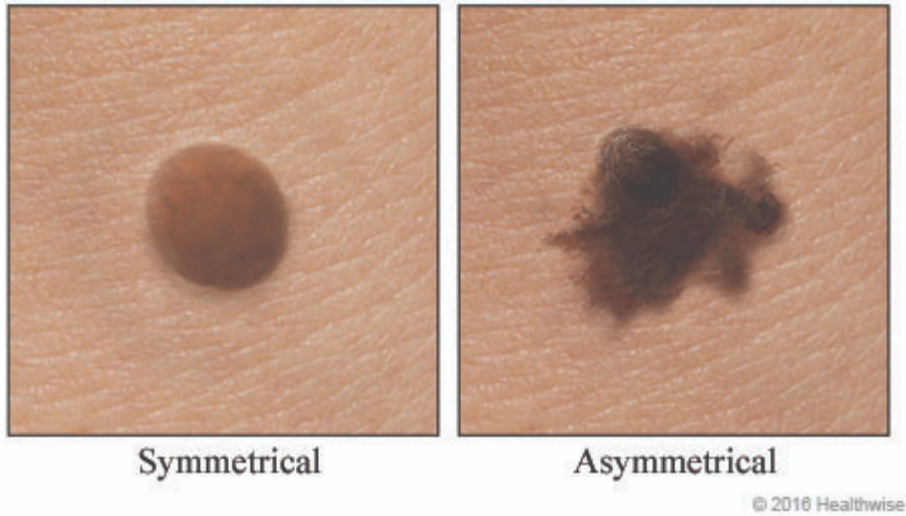
To perform a skin self-exam:

- Stand in front of a full-length mirror. Examine your body front and back, then examine your right and left sides with your arms raised.
- Bend your elbows and look carefully at your forearms, the back of your upper arms, and your palms.
- Look at your feet, the soles of your feet, and the spaces between your toes.
- Using a hand mirror, look at:
 - The back of your legs.
 - The back of your neck.
 - Your scalp. Part your hair several times, in different places, to look at your entire scalp.
 - Your back, buttocks, and genital area.

If you see a suspicious skin growth during your self-exam, contact your doctor.

Figure 3

Melanoma skin cancer sign: Asymmetry

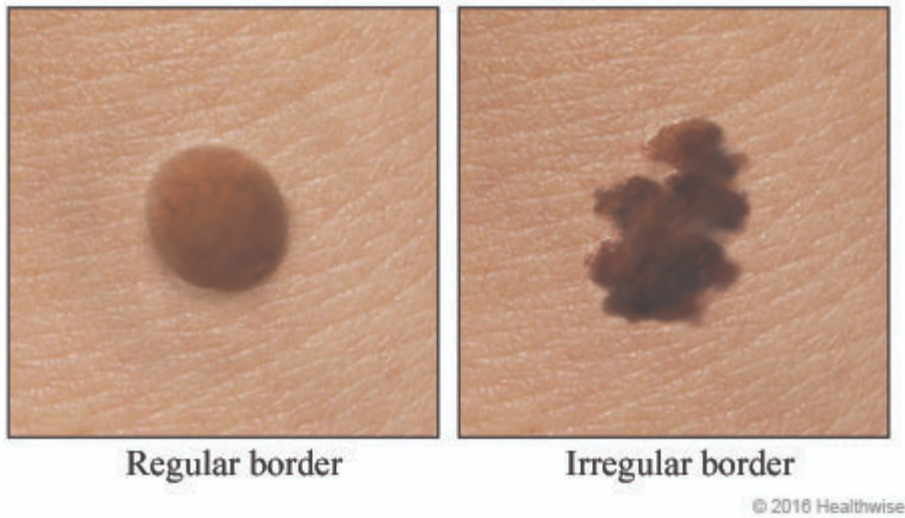


Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. The most important warning sign of melanoma is a **change** in the size, shape, or color of a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- **Asymmetry** is one thing to watch for. This means that one half doesn't match the other half. Call your doctor if you notice that:
 - One half of a mole doesn't match the other half.

Figure 4

Melanoma skin cancer sign: Border that is irregular



Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. The most important warning sign of melanoma is a **change** in the size, shape, or color of a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- **Border irregularity** is one thing to watch for. Call your doctor if any skin growth has developed ragged, notched, or blurred edges.

Figure 5

Melanoma skin cancer sign: Color variation



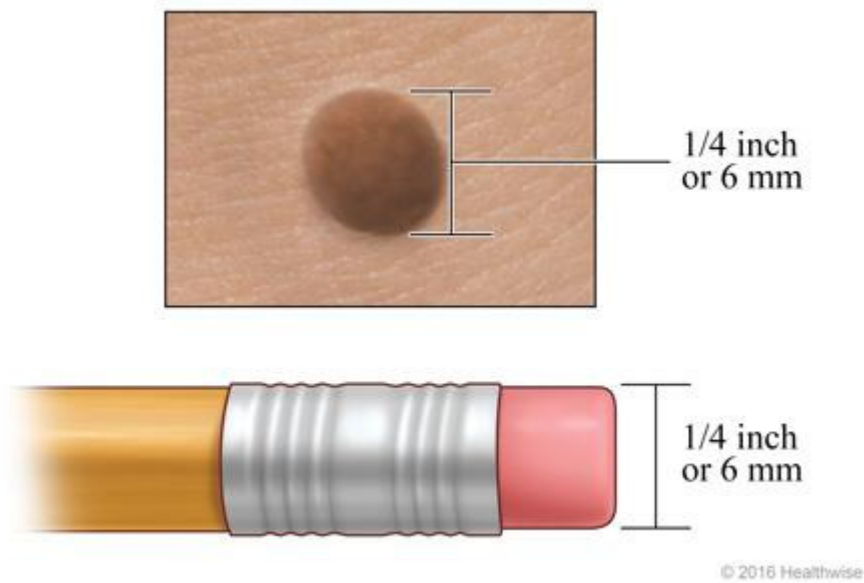
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Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. The most important warning sign of melanoma is a **change** in the size, shape, or color of a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- **Color variation** is one thing to watch for. Call your doctor if you notice that:
 - The color of a mole or other skin growth is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown, and black may be present. Dashes of red, white, and blue may add to the mottled appearance.
 - Color has spread from the edge of a mole into the surrounding skin.

Figure 6

Melanoma skin cancer sign: Diameter

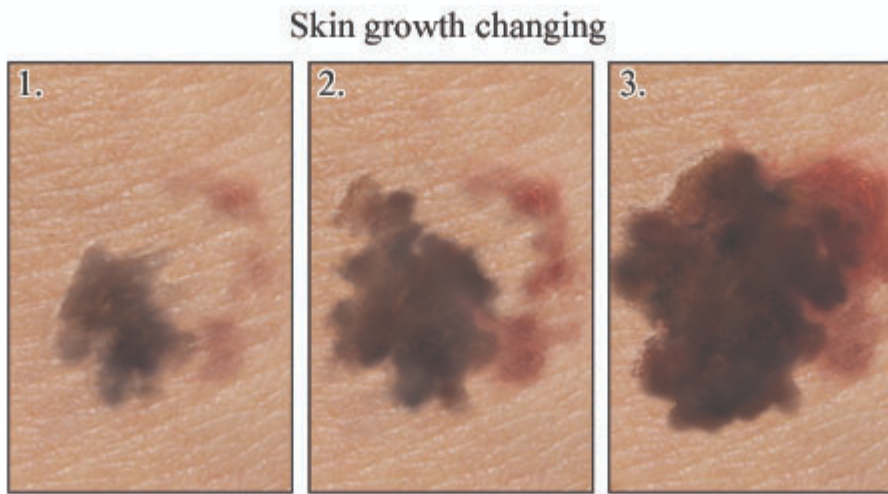


Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. The most important warning sign of melanoma is a **change** in the size, shape, or color of a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- **A change in diameter (width)** is one thing to watch for. Call your doctor if:
 - The width of a mole or skin growth is larger than 1/4 inch (6 mm), or about the size of a pencil eraser.
 - Any mole seems to be growing, even if it is still smaller than 1/4 inch (6 mm).

Figure 7

Melanoma skin cancer sign: Evolution



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Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. The most important warning sign of melanoma is a **change** in a mole or other skin growth, such as a birthmark.

- **Evolution** is another word for "change." Call your doctor if you notice any changes such as:
 - A change in the size, shape, or color of a mole.
 - A change in symptoms, such as a mole that becomes itchy or tender or that bleeds.

Note: The "printer friendly" document will not contain all the information available in the online document. Some information (e.g. cross-references to other topics, definitions or medical illustrations) is only available in the online version.



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