



Keeping an eye on skin spots

Even in the winter months you should not ignore your skin spots. They may vary from the descriptions listed, but if you have any of the below conditions, you should see your doctor.

HARMLESS SPOTS

Freckles and moles

Freckles are harmless coloured spots that range in size from 1 to 10mm. Moles are typically evenly coloured and may be raised, although they do not have to be. Moles have clear, even edges and are usually circular or oval in shape.

Seborrhoeic keratoses

By the age of 60, most people have at least one or two of these skin spots. This variety has a very discrete edge and frequently sit up on top of the skin. Colours vary from pale skin through orange to black and size often varies also, from a few millimetres to 2cm.

WARNING SIGNS

Dysplastic naevi

While this skin spot is not a skin cancer, it can be a warning that you may be more prone to melanoma. They are often flat, fairly large moles, which share some of the features of early melanoma (see below). They are often characterised by irregular borders and uneven colour with multiple shades of brown and sometimes pink.

Solar keratoses

This variety of skin spot is also not a skin cancer, but a warning that you may be prone to its development. Characterised by red, flattish, scaling areas which may sting if scratched, these sunspots tend to most commonly appear on sun-exposed skin in the over 40 age group.

SKIN CANCERS

Melanoma

Melanomas are dangerous skin cancers that can be fatal if not diagnosed early. When treated early, 95 per cent of melanomas are curable; however, if untreated, cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body. Melanomas can appear as new spots, or can result from existing spots, freckles or moles that changes colour, size or shape. They usually have an irregular or smudgy outline, may be blotchy and more than one colour, often brown, black, blue, red or grey. Melanomas grow over weeks to months and can appear anywhere on the body, including the scalp, soles of feet and between fingers.

Nodular melanoma

This is a highly dangerous form of melanoma. They can appear as small, round lumps on the skin and may be black or brown, pink or red in colour (resembling a blood blister). They can feel firm to the touch and, if neglected, will begin to bleed and crust. They tend to grow quickly and can be life threatening if not detected and removed promptly. The lesion may be deeper, and so more dangerous, than appears on the surface.



Squamous cell carcinoma

Although not as dangerous as melanomas, these skin spots may spread to other parts of the body if not treated. They typically appear as a thickened red, scaly spot, which may later bleed easily or ulcerate. They most often appear on body parts that are most often exposed to the sun and grow over a period of months.

Basal cell carcinoma

This is the most common and least dangerous form of skin cancer. They appear as a lump or scaling area which are red, pale or pearly in colour. As they grow they may become ulcerated like a sore that does not heal, or one that heals then breaks down again. They tend to grow slowly, usually on the head, neck and upper torso.

If you have skin spots on your body, you should monitor them regularly (at least every three months) contact your doctor in the event of any change or likeness to the above descriptions. Images of these skin spots can be obtained from <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/editorial.asp?pageid=1355> or for more general information about skin cancer prevention, visit <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au>

Source: The Cancer Council NSW.