

Fit Facts: Scan Skin with Self-Exams

Whether it's a mole you've had since childhood or an age spot that recently appeared, most "skin things" are harmless. Still, it's important to keep an eye on skin spots and growths. The effects of sun exposure on skin are cumulative, which means the risk of developing skin cancer increases with age.

Who Is at Risk?

No one is exempt from the risk for skin cancer. But a person who has any of the following should be extra cautious:

- A fair complexion, red or blonde hair, freckles or a tendency to burn easily
- A family history of skin cancer
- A personal history of three-or-more blistering sunburns as a child or teenager

Cancer of the skin is by far the most common of all cancers. Melanoma accounts for less than 2 percent of skin cancer cases, but causes a large majority of skin cancer deaths. If detected early, most skin cancers — even melanoma, the most serious form — are curable.

That's why it's important to make regular skin self-exams a habit. A monthly self-exam should include every area of the skin, including the face, neck, hands, back, scalp, soles of the feet and backs of the ears. A hand-held mirror can help to check areas that are hard to see.

The first symptom of melanoma is often a change in a mole, or the appearance of a new mole that has **ABCDE** characteristics. These **ABCDE** rules can help you tell a normal mole from cancer:

- **A**symmetry. One half of the mole does not match the other half.
- **B**order irregularity. The edges of the mole are ragged or irregular.
- **C**olor. The mole has different colors in it. It may be tan, brown, black, red or other colors. Or it may have areas that appear to have lost color.
- **D**iameter. The mole is bigger than 6 millimeters across, about the size of a pencil eraser. But some melanomas can be smaller.
- **E**volving. A mole changes in size, shape or color.

Specifically, any of the following warrants suspicion and a doctor's attention:

- A mole that is bleeding or has changed color, become enlarged or thickened
- A sore that takes several weeks to heal
- A reddish patch that won't go away, which may be painful or itchy
- A smooth bump that is indented in the middle
- A shiny, waxy, scar-like spot — it may be yellow or white with irregular borders

Those who are at high risk for skin cancer also may want to ask their doctor about scheduling periodic professional skin exams.

Sources: [The Mayo Clinic](#), [The American Cancer Society](#)