

Early Detection and Treatment of Skin Cancer

We should all be aware of what is normal for our skin, especially those over 40 years old. If you notice any changes or have any concerns you should see your GP immediately. People with fair skin and hair; blue or green eyes; lots of moles or freckles; suffered sunburn as a child; have used solariums; spend a lot of time or work outdoors or have a personal or family experience with skin cancer have a higher risk of developing skin cancer and need to take extra care to protect and check their skin.

Most cases of skin cancer can be cured if they are detected early, so early detection is crucial. Cancer Council ACT does not recommend any individual skin check service providers or skin cancer clinics.

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancers form when skin cells are damaged by ultraviolet (UV) radiation penetrating the skin.

The three main types of skin cancer are listed below.

Basal cell carcinoma

- is the most common and least dangerous form of skin cancer
- appears as a round or flattened lump or scaly area
- is red, pale or pearly in colour
- grows slowly, usually on the head, neck and upper torso but may also appear on other parts of the body
- may form an ulcer as it grows.

Squamous cell carcinoma

- is less common but more dangerous than basal cell carcinoma
- is not as dangerous as melanoma
- looks like a red scaly spot, usually thickened, which may bleed easily or ulcerate after some time
- may be tender to touch
- usually grows over weeks to months and may spread to other parts of the body if not treated promptly
- appears on parts of the body most often exposed to the sun.

Melanoma

- is the most serious form of skin cancer and the least common
- appears as a new spot, or an existing spot, freckle or mole that changes colour, size or shape
- usually has an irregular or smudgy outline and is more than one colour
- only rarely causes pain, bleeds or itches
- grows over weeks to months, anywhere on the body (and not just in places that get a lot of sun)
- if untreated, cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body.

Self-examination

People should be aware of what is normal for their skin. Unlike many other cancers, skin cancer is often visible, making it easier to detect in the early stages. Early detection is crucial if skin cancer is to be cured.

Use a hand-held mirror to check the skin on your back and the back of your neck or ask someone else to have a look for you. Don't forget to check your armpits, inner legs, ears, eyelids, hands and feet. Use a comb to move sections of hair aside and inspect your scalp.

The A.B.C.D. of early detection – what to look for

A: Asymmetry – One half of the spot doesn't match the other

B: Border – The edges are irregular, ragged, notched, or blurred

C: Colour – The colour is not the same all over and may include shades of brown or black, red, white or blue

D: Diameter – The spot is larger than 6 mm across (about 1/4 inch) or is growing larger.

Also be aware of any mole or freckle which:

- changes over a period of months
- grows in size
- changes shape
- becomes mottled in colour
- has a persistent itch.

Photographs of any suspicious areas can be useful to record any changes. People worried about changes that might indicate skin cancer should talk to their doctor.

Who can diagnose and treat skin cancer?

All doctors can assess your risk and diagnose possible skin cancers. Although suspicious spots should be treated appropriately, harmless spots should not be removed unnecessarily.

Doctors/General Practitioners (GPs)

Your GP can examine your skin and advise you of appropriate care. GPs are well trained in diagnosing and treating skin cancers, which may include minor procedures. It is therefore recommended that you first visit a GP to assess your skin.

Dermatologists (skin specialists)

If you have an unusual spot on your skin, your GP may treat it, or refer you to a dermatologist – also known as a skin specialist. A dermatologist is a doctor who has completed additional training to specialise in diagnosing and treating skin diseases, including skin cancer.

To see a dermatologist you should get a referral from a GP. You can see a dermatologist without a GP referral but under Medicare your rebate will be smaller than if you had a referral.

Book your appointment as soon as you can, as it may be a number of weeks before you can get an appointment. If your case is urgent, your referring GP should be able to arrange an early appointment.

Skin cancer clinics

There are skin cancer clinics in Canberra, offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. Medical practitioners – not dermatologists – are more likely to operate skin cancer clinics. If you wish to see a dermatologist or get a second opinion, you may ask for a referral.

Some clinics may offer digital imaging to help examine skin spots. It is important to remember that these are simply tools to help the person examine your skin. Machines alone cannot diagnose skin cancer; it is still the experience and skill of the operator that determines the quality of the diagnosis.

Whilst some skin cancer clinics may offer a higher level of expertise in skin examination, at this stage there is no reliable way of evaluating the quality of care provided. For this reason Cancer Council ACT does not endorse or recommend any individual skin check service providers or skin cancer clinics.

Questions to ask

Whoever you decide to see, these are some questions you should ask.

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the person examining your skin?
- If you are told you have skin cancer, make sure you ask:
 - What type of skin cancer do I have (is it a common low-grade skin cancer or is it a potentially serious melanoma)?
 - How extensive or advanced is the skin cancer?
 - Do I need treatment immediately?
 - What are the treatment options and the benefits and risks of the treatment options?
 - What sun protection is needed? It is important to ask about skin cancer prevention.
 - What follow-up is required?
 - What costs are involved? Ask how much each procedure will cost and how much is refundable through Medicare. If you are in a private health fund, check first if any of these procedures are covered by your plan.

Further information and resources

Please also refer to the information sheet *Being SunSmart in Australia*.

For more details about detecting skin cancer, see the leaflet *Know your skin (2010)* available online or by calling Cancer Council.

These are available from the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 or Cancer Council ACT on 6257 9999.

UV protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at Cancer Council ACT's Fairbairn shop or online at www.shop.actcancer.org

This information can be photocopied for distribution.

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