

What is Malignant Melanoma?

Malignant melanoma is a cancer that usually starts in the skin.

Skin cells that produce natural pigment are called melanocytes; a collection of these cells on the skin can appear as a mole, naevus or 'beauty spot'.

Malignant melanoma is a form of cancer affecting the pigment producing cells and often appears as a changing mole.

Changes in size, sensation, colour and shape could be the first warning signs of a malignant melanoma.

What causes Malignant Melanoma?

The main risk factor associated with malignant melanoma is excessive exposure to the sun. Ultraviolet (UV) rays within sunlight are known to cause skin cancers.

An individual's skin type and response to sun exposure will also determine the likelihood of developing a melanoma. Childhood sun exposure has been identified as an important factor in the development of malignant melanoma especially in younger adults.

Diagnosis and Treatment

All suspected malignant melanomas are treated with surgery. This involves removing the complete tumour with an area of surrounding skin. The tissue is then sent for diagnosis. It may take two weeks for the biopsy results to be ready. Following removal and examination of the melanoma, the doctor may decide to carry out a wider excision. This entails having a further margin of skin removed from the original biopsy site to ensure that no cancer cells have been left behind. This again can be done using a local anaesthetic, but this will be decided during your consultation with the doctor.

It may be necessary to repair the area with a skin graft, depending on the size and location of the biopsy site.

Following this no further treatment or investigations are usually required.

If in the future the malignant melanoma spreads elsewhere you may need further medical treatment involving surgery, radiotherapy, or chemotherapy.

Follow up after treatment

Once surgery is complete you will need to be checked regularly.

Depending on diagnosis this may initially be as regular as every 3 months for a year or more, gradually tailing off over a period of time.

During these visits the original scar site will be examined to detect any recurrence in the area. Also the lymph glands nearest to the scar site will be examined, to ensure that the melanoma has not spread.

The Future

Malignant melanoma caught at an early stage has a very good chance of cure.

When a melanoma is removed one of the things that is looked at under the microscope is how deep or thick the melanoma is. A thin melanoma lowers the risk of it spreading to other parts of the body.

How to Help Yourself

Following a diagnosis of malignant melanoma it is important to check your skin for anything unusual, to detect early warning signs. Check for any existing or new moles that **change shape, colour, itch or bleed**.

Many changes are harmless, but if in doubt contact your doctor.

Following surgery for malignant melanoma you are advised to perform your own examination once a month.

You will be taught self-examination. If in doubt, please ask.

Self examination

- Check your scar for unusual lumps or dark spots that appear at or near the site of removal.
- For melanomas of the leg, feel for nodes behind the knees and in the groin of the affected leg.
- For melanomas of the arm, feel for nodes in the armpit on the affected side, also the areas above the collarbone and in the lower neck.
- For melanomas of the head and neck, feel for nodes in the side of the neck, under the chin, above the collarbone, behind the ears and at the back of the neck.
- For melanomas occurring on the trunk, feel for nodes in both armpits and both groins along with the area above the collarbone and the nodes of the neck.

An easy way to examine yourself is to feel with the flat of your hand against the skin, as opposed to squeezing the skin between the fingers.

Many people feel this works well whilst having a bath or shower.

Taking Care in the Sun

- Stay in the shade between the hours of 11am and 3pm.
- Make sure you never burn. (Avoid the use of sun beds).
- Always cover up; wear light cool clothing of a tight weave, wide-brimmed hats and 100% U.V. protective sunglasses.
- Take extra care of children as their skin is delicate. Very young babies should be kept out of strong direct sunshine.
- Use a sunscreen of factor 15 and above, according to your skin type, apply it 15-30 minutes before you go outside and reapply it often.

Other sources of information:

The Lodge Cancer Support Centre.
01803 617521

Cancerbackup/Macmillan:
Freephone: 0808 800 1234
www.cancerbackup.org.uk

Torbay and South Devon **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust



**PATIENT
INFORMATION**

Malignant Melanoma

To obtain further advice and information
please contact

**Skin Cancer Nurse Specialist
Torbay Hospital
Tel: 01803 655278**