

The dangers of skin cancer.

There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and malignant melanoma. Many people, men in particular, are ignoring the dangers of melanoma. In this factsheet we explore more about skin cancer and how you can reduce your risk.



Risk factors

Melanoma skin cancer is the 5th most common cancer overall in the UK. Around 13,500 new cases of melanoma are diagnosed each year. Skin cancer rates are more than 4 times higher in the UK than they were in the late 1970's. A recent study by the World Health Organisation has shown that the death rate for melanoma among British men has increased 74% since the mid-1980s but for women it only increased by 9%. This may be because men are less likely to act on advice to avoid over exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun and less likely to report potentially cancerous moles.

Some of the increase in melanoma may be because doctors are better at watching people for signs of melanoma, and detecting it at an early stage. But it also may be to do with a change in how much time we spend in the sun, such as more people taking holidays abroad.

Age

The risk of melanoma increases with age.

Ultraviolet light exposure

Ultraviolet light (radiation) is the main environmental factor that increases the risk of developing melanoma and comes from the sun or sunbeds.

Skin colour and freckles

People who are very fair skinned, especially with fair or red hair, are more at risk of developing melanoma. So are people with a lot of freckles.

Where you were born

Fair skinned people born in a hot country, for example Australia, have an increased risk of melanoma throughout their life. Their risk is higher than people who went to live in a hot country as a teenager or people with similar skin colouring who live in cooler climates.

Sunburn

Sunburn increases your risk of melanoma. People who have had sunburn are more than twice as likely to get melanoma than those who have not. The risk is higher if you have had sunburn several times in your life. This increase in risk is seen with sunburn at all ages, not just in childhood.

Moles

The more moles you have on your body, the higher your risk of melanoma. This does not mean that if you have moles you will get melanoma but you do need to be careful to protect yourself from the sun.

Family history

If you have a close relative who has had melanoma, you are more at risk yourself. This is probably partly because we tend to share the same sort of colouring and skin type as our close relatives.

Reducing your risk

Melanoma isn't always preventable, but you can reduce your chances of developing it by avoiding getting sunburned (even going pink in the sun).

Most people are burnt while abroad on holiday or in the UK in the summer while doing outdoor activities, such as gardening, sunbathing or playing sports.

On these occasions, you need to be careful, particularly if you have pale skin and many moles. You can help protect yourself from sun damage by:

- using sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher
- dressing sensibly in the sun
- avoid sun in the middle of the day, from about 10am to 3pm when it is at it's strongest
- wear sunglasses to protect your eyes

Regularly checking your skin can help lead to an early diagnosis and increase your chances of successful treatment. If you notice any changes make sure you get them checked by your doctor.



Your risk of developing cancer depends on many factors, including your age, genetics, and exposure to risk factors.