

## The Skin Cancer That Kills: Malignant Melanoma

Today, the rate of skin cancers in the United States is higher than ever before. The main factor contributing to this is increased exposure to skin damaging Ultraviolet rays (UVR). The “sun and fun” lifestyle—more outdoors and less clothing—has caused an increase in all skin cancers. Tanning beds provide UVR exposure year-round to those who use this technology. Depletion of the atmosphere’s ozone layer, a consequence of global warming, has reduced the natural filtering of hazardous UVR, giving us more exposure in less time spent outdoors.

Melanoma is a particularly aggressive type of pigmented skin cancer. It is usually dark brown, black, or blue black in color. It may start as a brown freckle-like patch of skin, or a colored mole. Melanoma is more dangerous than the more common basal cell and squamous type skin cancers. Melanoma may spread quickly, and ultimately may kill.

The American Cancer Society, reports almost 77,000 cases of melanoma will be diagnosed this year, 45,000 men and 32,000 women. Unlike the other common skin cancers, which rarely spread and kill, melanoma will kill 9,500 people—6300 men and 3200 women. Here in Minnesota, 1,020 cases of melanoma will be diagnosed, and about 12.5% of those people will die from it. Melanoma incidence rates have been increasing in the US: from 2005 to 2009, incidence rates among US whites increased by 2.8% per year. One major sunburn as a child significantly increases the risk of getting melanoma later in life!

### So who gets melanoma?

**Skin types.** Pale skinned people are the most susceptible. If you always burn and never tan, you have type 1 skin—the highest risk for melanoma. Type 1 skin people are very pale, may have red or blond hair or blue eyes. People with type 2 skin will burn easily and rarely tan.

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These people also are at very high risk. Type 3 skin people will tan more and burn less—melanoma risk is even less. Types 4, 5, and 6 are the skin types found in the brown and darkly pigmented people of color. Darker skinned people have a much lower risk of melanoma. If they get melanoma, the palms, the bottom of the feet, and the nail-beds are higher risk areas for melanoma in people of color.

**Family history.** If someone else in your family has had melanoma, then you have an increased risk. If that person had melanoma at a very young age (teen years through the thirties), your risk is slightly higher. If multiple people in the family have had melanoma, the family may have a true hereditary form of the cancer. People who have many moles, 40-50, have higher risk of having a genetic form of melanoma. People with many moles should see a dermatologist rather than just a family physician. Luckily, only about 10% of melanomas are hereditary.

**Personal history.** A personal history of multiple sunburns as a child increases the risk of all skin cancers. A history of very prolonged sun- or UVR-exposure increases the risk of melanoma (UV tanning bed exposure, working outdoors without sun protection, multiple sunburns throughout life, etc.). Having any prior type of skin cancer increases a person's melanoma risk.

**Prevention is the answer.** First, limit exposure in the bright, strong midday sun, and when in sun, cover with clothing, broad-brim hats, and sunscreen of SPF 30 or more. Children, especially, need to be protected from sunburns. Tanning beds are carcinogenic, and should be avoided. Finally, if you have a lot of moles, have a family history of melanoma, or have had a history of many sunburns, start by having your family doctor or a dermatologist check your skin.

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**The good news:** Most melanomas can be prevented, and melanoma, when discovered early can be cured!! Don't become a statistic, be safe in the sun.