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# Health & Fitness



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## Body Search

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### Are your moles pre-cancerous or cancerous lesions?

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**By Dr. Boris Zaks**

Do you have any moles on your body that are making you anxious about their true nature? Most individuals have a number of dark spots on their skin (freckles, moles, etc.). The vast majority of these spots are normal, but some may be pre-cancerous or cancerous lesions.

There will be more than one million new cases of skin cancer diagnosed in the United States this year. According to the American Cancer Society, almost half of all new cancers are skin cancers. Overexposure to ultraviolet light (from the sun and tanning beds) is the greatest risk factor for developing skin cancer. The three types of skin cancer are: Basal Cell Carcinoma, Squamous Cell Carcinoma, and Melanoma. The first two are the most common forms of skin cancer and appear usually on sun-exposed areas of the body. If detected and treated early, they have an excellent cure rate. Melanoma, however, due to its ability to metastasize (spread to other parts of the body) is the deadliest form of skin cancer. The following is a more in-depth look at the three types of skin cancer:

**Basal Cell Carcinoma:** It is the most common of all cancers, affecting 800,000 Americans each year. These cancers arise from the bottom of the epidermis (the outer skin layer). Chronic exposure to the sun is the cause of the majority of these lesions and occur most frequently on exposed parts of the body (the face, ears, neck, scalp, shoulders, and back). There are several signs that suggest this diagnosis including: an open sore that bleeds, oozes, or crusts; a red patch or irritated area; or a shiny or pearly bump that has rolled borders and has a central

indentation and tiny surface blood vessels. Basal Cell Carcinomas rarely spread throughout the body. However, they often occur on the face and their local spread can result in cosmetic deformity if they are not diagnosed early. Fortunately, these cancers are highly curable with surgical and non-surgical methods.

**Squamous Cell Carcinoma:** It is the second most common skin cancer, afflicting over 200,000 Americans each year. It also arises from the epidermis. Most of these tumors are caused by chronic sun exposure and occur on exposed areas of the body. Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC) may also occur on areas of the skin that has suffered certain kinds of injury such as burns, irradiated areas, chemical exposures, or chronic skin inflammation. Many of these cancers arise from pre-cancerous precursors called actinic keratoses. These easily treated lesions are typically red, rough areas on the skin. As they develop, they can turn into SCC. Some warning signs include: wart-like growths that crust or bleed; persistent, scaly red patch with irregular borders; or open sores that bleed or crusts. SCC has a higher risk of metastasis, especially when arising in certain higher risk areas such as the lips. These lesions should be reported to your dermatologist for prompt evaluation.

**Melanoma:** It is the most serious form of skin cancer and it is derived from the pigment cells in the skin. However, if diagnosed and removed while it is still thin, it is usually highly curable. If the cancer metastasizes to other regions of the body, it can be harder to treat. Over the past decade, the number of cases of melanoma has increased more rapidly than that of any other cancer. These growths are usually irregular, brown-black or multicolored areas. The mnemonic ABCD is a simple way to remember some signs of a possible melanoma. If any of these signs are detected, a dermatologist must be seen promptly.

A. **Asymmetry:** When one looks at a melanoma, an imaginary line through the middle would not create equal halves.

B. **Borders:** Routine moles have nice, smooth borders while melanomas may have notched edges.

C. **Color:** Melanomas may have several shades of colors within them. Common moles have a single shade.

D. **Diameter:** Melanomas typically have the previous described changes and grow to a larger size than regular mole. The size of a pencil eraser (6mm) is the general cut-off point.

In addition to the ABCD's, it is crucial to look for a change in a mole such as:

increase in size, change in color, elevation, and surface changes. Symptoms such as itching or pain are also suspicious. If any of these signs are detected, a dermatologist must be seen promptly for a skin examination and possible biopsy.

It is now highly apparent that exposure to UV light is the primary cause of most skin cancers as well as premature wrinkling and age spots. Minimizing sun exposure, avoiding tanning beds, using broad-spectrum sunscreens with a minimum SPF of 15, and wearing protective clothing are important for prevention of these skin conditions. A visit to your dermatologist for an annual skin examination is crucial for evaluation of any suspicious moles that you detect or examination of areas of the skin that are difficult to evaluate such as the back.

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