Removing moles? Scarring? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

Can moles be removed? Just wondering.

(2) Dear Alice,

Recently someone asked you whether or not moles could be removed. You said they could via cosmetic surgery. Does this cosmetic removal result in any scarring or permanent marks? Does the entire mole disappear?

Answer

Dear Readers,

Covert moles can be tricky to uncover. On the other hand, getting rid of unwanted skin moles is a relatively simple task. All pre-cancerous and malignant moles should be removed. As for noncancerous, or benign moles... yes, they can be removed too. However, this procedure is purely cosmetic, and any type of mole removal will leave a small scar.

Most dermatologists can perform cosmetic mole removals (this is not something to try at home with your trusty disposable razor). To take off an elevated mole, a dermatologist numbs the area with local anesthetic and then shaves off the raised section of the mole with a sterile scalpel. The healing process usually leaves a flat scar that's somewhat lighter than the rest of your skin. Sometimes the scar may be as pigmented or noticeable as the original mole.

Flat moles, or moles that are suspected of being cancerous, may require an excision biopsy. During this procedure, the entire mole is taken out and the remaining opening is stitched shut. After removing the mole, a sample is sent to a lab to determine if it is cancerous. This procedure also leaves a scar - usually a fine line. In the majority of cases, a mole removal requires one office visit plus a follow-up visit.

There is no medical basis for the removal, or treatment of any kind, of noncancerous moles. In fact, they are a common part of the landscape of adult skin. On average, adults have 15 to 20 moles on their bodies. If you don't like the way they look, you can have them removed! However, removing moles usually means replacing them with scars. Whether or not the trade-off is worthwhile for you depends on the size and look of the mole (and what impact it has on how you feel or your appearance), where the mole is located on your body, if it is irritating or cancerous, and your body's typical response to wound healing, among other factors.
Removing moles is appropriate for medical or other reasons that include melanoma, or if the mole is located on an area where it’s easily aggravated by clothing or something else.

Most moles do not pose any sort of health risk. A note of caution: if you notice any changes in the shape, size, and/or color of a mole, or if a mole starts to bleed, you need to have it looked at by a health care provider right away. For more information on cancerous moles, read Growing purple mole: Should I be concerned? under the Go Ask Alice! General Health archives.

If you have a bothersome mole, feel free to have it removed. However, given the expense and possibility of scaring, traipsing to the dermatologist seems akin to making a mountain out of a molehill!

Alice!
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