Mole = Melanoma? [1]

(1) Alice —

What does a melanoma look like?

Signed,
Sunny

(2) Dear Alice,

I have a mole that has appeared sometime in the last two years. It is underneath my pubic hair and it is about half an inch long with one raised area. I'm worried about it because it is larger than any others I have, and because I didn't have it as a child. It is NOT an STD, according to my ob/gyn. Could it be melanoma?? Thanks.

Answer

Dear Sunny and Reader #2,

Melanoma can have many faces so it's helpful to know what to look for — kudos to you both for seeking more information. Melanoma, a form of skin cancer, is the result of melanocytes (skin cells that produce melanin, the pigment responsible for tanning and for protecting the skin from the sun) that have gone awry, producing melanin beyond the skin's need. While melanoma isn't the most common type of skin cancer, it's the most serious. Most melanomas and other skin cancers appear in existing moles, some appear as new skin growths. They usually appear in areas that are exposed to the sun (face, arms, legs, etc.), but can occur anywhere including the mouth, scalp, genitals, soles of the feet, palms, and between the toes. Reader #2, if you're concerned a mole could be melanoma, it's recommended that you make a follow-up appointment with a medical professional may help determine if it warrants further attention.

To catch melanoma early, it may help to know the common characteristics. The Skin Cancer Foundation [2] suggests using an easy-to-remember A-B-C-D-E skin self-exam guide for inspecting moles and new skin growths for the possibility of skin cancer:

- A — The mole or skin growth has an asymmetrical shape.
- B — The border of the mole or skin growth is irregular — notched or scalloped.
- C — The color of the mole or skin growth has an uneven color or several colors.
- D — The diameter of the mole of skin growth is larger than 1/4 inch.
- E — The mole or skin growth is evolving in size, shape, or color.

Less common warning signs include:

- Changes in the surface of a mole
- Scaliness, oozing, bleeding, or the appearance of a bump or nodule
- Spread of color from the border of the growth into surrounding skin
- Change in sensation, including itchiness, tenderness, or pain

Of course, if you’ve got a concerning mole (one or more — regardless of whether or it fits any of these descriptions), you may want to have it checked out in the short term. Why? Melanoma may be rarer than other types of skin cancer, but it’s more likely to metastasize. This means that the cancerous cells are more likely to spread to other areas of the body. The good news is that it can be treated and cured when caught early.

While this form of skin cancer does not discriminate, a few personal and situational factors may place certain individuals at increased risk. These factors include:

- Fair skin or hair
- A family or personal history of melanoma
- A personal history of sunburn
- A heavy amount of exposure to the sun or UV rays
- Many moles or freckles
- A weakened immune system

If you have risk factors for melanoma, it might be wise to work with a dermatologist to monitor skin changes and determine how often skin cancer exams would be appropriate. Even among folks who don’t associate with these factors, seeking prompt medical attention about a questionable mole or possible melanoma is recommended.

In addition to keeping a keen eye out for above signs and symptoms of melanoma, there are preventive measures to reduce your risk of melanoma and other types of skin cancer. These measures include avoiding the sun during the middle of the day, wearing sunscreen year-around, wearing protective clothing, avoiding indoor tanning, and becoming familiar with your skin so that you’ll notice changes. Lastly, stay up to date on melanoma and other skin conditions by checking out more Q&As in [Skin Conditions](#) category of the [Go Ask Alice! General Health](#) archives.

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