



THE AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE  
OF DERMATOLOGISTS

# Knowing your risk factors and monitoring your own skin

Australia has one of the highest skin cancer rates in the world. At least 2 in 3 Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

Most skin cancer cases in Australia are due to excessive exposure to ultraviolet radiation (UV),<sup>2</sup> making skin cancer one of the most preventable cancers. Increasing community awareness of skin cancer prevention, good sun protection behaviours and early detection are key to reducing the risk of skin cancer.

The Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD) has developed a fact sheet that provides information on skin cancer risk factors, warning signs and checking your own skin.

For more information about skin cancer statistics in Australia, see College's statement on the [Impact of Skin Cancer in Australia](#).

## ACD Recommendations

- ✓ Know your personal risk of skin cancer. The single greatest risk factor for skin cancer is excessive exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or from solariums. Other risk factors include fair skin and hair; a high number of common or unusual moles; a weakened immune system; a family history of melanoma; and previous personal diagnosis of melanoma or keratinocyte cancer.
- ✓ If you have strong or multiple risk factors for skin cancer, have your skin checked by a dermatologist.
- ✓ Perform self-examinations of your whole body, including scalp, hands and feet with a hand mirror in front of a bathroom wall mirror so that you are familiar with your skin. Look for changes in:
  - New moles and spots
  - Existing moles which increase in size, change colour or become irregular
  - Any mole or spot that becomes raised, lumpy, scaly or ulcerated
  - Red moles that are firm and enlarging
  - Any mole or spot that itches, bleeds or weeps
  - Any spot that looks different from the others
- ✓ If you notice any changes to skin spots over 4-6 weeks, book an appointment with your GP.

<sup>1</sup> Olsen CM, Pandeya N, Green AC, Ragaini BS, Venn AJ, Whiteman DC. [Keratinocyte cancer incidence in Australia: a review of population-based incidence trends and estimates of lifetime risk](#). Public Health Res Pract 2022 Mar 10; 32(1) Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/35290995>

<sup>2</sup> Olsen CM, Wilson LF, Green AC, Bain CJ, Fritschi L, Neale RE, et al. [Cancers in Australia attributable to exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation and prevented by regular sunscreen use](#). Aust N Z J Public Health 2015 Oct;39(5):471-6 Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26437734>.

## What are the risk factors for skin cancer?

There are a combination of risk factors for that can influence your risk of developing skin cancer.

- **Excessive exposure to ultraviolet (UV)** radiation from the sun or from solariums is the single greatest risk factor for skin cancer. UV radiation can damage DNA in skin cells causing mutations. Over time, mutations caused by excessive UV, such as childhood sunburn or long-term occupational exposure can accumulate and trigger changes in skin cells that can increase the risk of developing skin cancer.

Other known risk factors for skin cancer include:

- **Skin and hair pigmentation:** Having a fair complexion, freckles, blue or green eyes, or red or blonde hair, such as those with Celtic ancestry. They have lower amounts of melanin putting them at a higher risk of skin cancer. Melanin is the protein in the skin and hair that gives it a darker colour and can offer some natural protection against UV radiation.
- **Moles:** Having a high number of common moles (greater than 100) or increased number of unusual moles (dysplastic naevi) that are large, smudgy, have an ill-defined border, uneven colour, irregular shape or some pinkness.
- **A depressed immune system:** Some diseases or drug treatments taken as part of medical care can prevent the immune system from functioning properly. People who are immunosuppressed, such as solid organ transplant recipients, have a higher risk of developing keratinocyte cancers (KCs) and melanoma.<sup>3</sup>
- **Family history:** A person with a first degree relative (mother, father or sibling) who has had a melanoma diagnosis has a 74% greater risk of developing melanoma, 22% greater risk of squamous cell carcinoma and 27% greater risk of basal cell carcinoma compared to a person with no affected relatives.<sup>4</sup>
- **Previous personal diagnosis:** People who have had a previous diagnosis and treated for KC or melanoma have a greater risk of additional diagnoses.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup>

## I have multiple risk factors for skin cancer, what should I do?

If you have strong or multiple risk factors for skin cancer you should have your skin checked by a dermatologist, medical doctors specialised in conditions of the skin, hair and nails including skin cancer.

A dermatologist will be able to recommend how often you should visit and whether you should continue to be checked by a dermatologist or a general practitioner (GP).

## How do I perform a skin examination?

Check your entire body and scalp with the help of a hand mirror in front of a bathroom wall mirror and ask a family member or partner to check difficult-to-see areas, including your back and back of neck.

It is also important that people check areas that are not exposed to the sun, such as soles of the feet, between fingers and toes, and under nails.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ng JC, Cumming S, Leung V, Chong AH. Accrual of non-melanoma skin cancer in renal-transplant recipients: Experience of a Victoria tertiary referral institution. *Australas J Dermatol* 2014 Feb; 55(1): 43-8. Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23808627>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.jaad.org/article/S0190-9622\(19\)30639-5/fulltext](https://www.jaad.org/article/S0190-9622(19)30639-5/fulltext)

<sup>5</sup> The Australasian College of Dermatologists. A to Z of Skin: Basal Cell Carcinoma; Squamous cell carcinoma; and Melanoma. <https://www.dermcoll.edu.au/a-to-z-of-skin/> Accessed January 2017 Contributors: Dr Chris Kearney; Dr Brad Jones; Associate Professor John Kelly 14.

<sup>6</sup> Cancer Council Australia. Position statement – sun protection and infants (0-12 months).

<sup>7</sup> Cancer Council Australia. Position statement – Screening and early detection of skin cancer.

<sup>8</sup> Cancer Council Australia. Check for signs of skin cancer. <http://www.cancer.org.au/preventing-cancer/sunprotection/check-for-signs-of-skin-cancer.html> Accessed May 2020

<sup>9</sup> Cancer Council Australia. Check for signs of skin cancer. <http://www.cancer.org.au/preventing-cancer/sunprotection/check-for-signs-of-skin-cancer.html> Accessed May 2020

## What should I look out for?

It is important to perform regular self-examinations so that you are familiar with your own skin and can watch out for any new or changing skin spots over 4-6 weeks, including:

- New moles and spots
- Existing moles which increase in size, change colour or become irregular
- Any mole or spot that becomes raised, lumpy, scaly or ulcerated
- Red moles that are firm and enlarging
- Any mole or spot that itches, bleeds or weeps
- Any spot that looks different from the others

If you notice any changes to skin spots, book an appointment with your GP.

### What about for melanoma?

Melanoma can vary in the way it looks and the first sign is usually a new or changing skin spot. An easy way to remember what to look out for is by using the ABCDE melanoma detection guide.<sup>10</sup>

- **A**symmetry – Spots that lack symmetry
- **B**order – Spots with an uneven or irregular edge/border
- **C**olour – Blotchy spots with different colours (light and dark brown, black, blue, red, white and grey)
- **D**iameter – Spots that increase in size
- **E**volving – Spots that evolve or change over time in size, shape or colour

## Other useful ACD skin cancer factsheets

For further information on skin cancer, the Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD) has developed a suite of factsheets for consumers and health professionals available [here](#), on:

- What types of skin cancers are there?
- How do I protect my skin from the sun?
- When to see a health professional?

This factsheet is also available online. For more topics, visit [dermcoll.edu.au](http://dermcoll.edu.au) or scan the QR code.

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### About us

Dermatologists are doctors who are the medical specialists in skin health.

The Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD):

- Trains and supports dermatologists
- Advocates for better skin health for our communities
- Sets the clinical standard in dermatology



This is a general guide only and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The ACD is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information.

<sup>10</sup> Cancer Council Australia. Check for signs of skin cancer. <http://www.cancer.org.au/preventing-cancer/sunprotection/check-for-signs-of-skin-cancer.html> Accessed May 2020