

Ask The Experts

Am I at risk of getting skin cancer?

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Q I am a 32-year-old man who loves cycling and water sports. I do not have the habit of using sunblock and some friends say I might get skin cancer. What are the symptoms and my risks?

A I agree with what your friends say. You should try to minimise excessive sun exposure as there is clear evidence of a link between sun exposure and skin cancer.

Skin cancer is the growth of cancerous cells that arise from cells found in the skin. This happens when there is mutation in the DNA of skin cells, mainly due to exposure to the sun and ultra-violet rays.

Data from the Singapore Cancer Registries (2010-2014) show that skin cancer ranks as the sixth most common cancer in men and the seventh most common in women.

Types of skin cancer

Skin cancers can be broadly divided into two groups:

1. Melanoma

Melanoma, or mole cancer, is cancer originating from melanocytes, the pigment-producing cells in the skin.

Melanomas are less common than non-melanoma skin cancers, but they are far more dangerous as they can spread to other parts of the body, which can be life-threatening.

Early detection of melanoma is extremely important as it significantly improves the prognosis.

Melanoma is often present as a changing mole, which is

irregular in shape and colour, and may bleed and ulcerate.

2. Non-melanoma skin cancer

Also known as NMSC, it includes:

■ **Basal cell carcinoma:** This is the most common form of skin cancer. It appears as a slowly growing bump on the skin. It may bleed or ulcerate, and the wound is often slow to heal. The borders of the lump may be raised. It rarely spreads and therefore carries a favourable prognosis.

■ **Squamous cell carcinoma:** This often appears as a scaly patch that enlarges slowly. It can sometimes become very thick and wart-like and can bleed and ulcerate. Some forms may spread, but the risk is lower than in melanomas.

Risk factors

Factors that may increase the risk of skin cancer include:

■ **Fair skin:** Skin that is fair has less pigmentation and will provide less protection from ultra-violet rays.

■ **Excessive sun exposure:** Having acute episodes of sunburn and cumulative lifetime sun exposure may put you at risk.

■ **Moles:** People with many moles, especially dysplastic nevi (abnormal moles), may have a higher risk.

■ **Family history of skin cancers:** If your parent or sibling has had skin cancer, you may be at a higher risk.

■ **Exposure to radiation:** People who undergo radiation therapy may have increased risk.

■ **A weakened immune system:** People who take oral medications that suppress the immune system, such as renal transplant patients, may have a higher risk.

Screening for skin cancer

If you are worried about any unusual changes in your skin, see your doctor.

Skin cancer screening is done by a thorough visual skin examination by a medical professional, such as a dermatologist.

This will allow for early detection of skin cancer and improve the overall prognosis.

Often, a dermatoscopic examination, using a skin surface microscope, helps to improve the accuracy of early detection of skin cancers, in particular melanomas. A skin biopsy is then performed to confirm the diagnosis of skin cancer.

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