

## Skin cancer - early detection is critical

Each year in Australia, more than 1,600 people die from skin cancer. Yet skin cancer is an almost totally preventable disease and 95 per cent of skin cancers are treatable if they are detected early. Regular checks of your skin should detect any suspicious lumps or spots as soon as they develop.

### Three types of skin cancer

There are three types of skin cancer:

- Basal cell carcinoma
- Squamous cell carcinoma
- Melanoma.

These are named after the type of cell they start from.

#### Basal cell carcinoma



This is the most common and least dangerous skin cancer. It appears as a lump or scaling area and can be red, pale or pearly in colour. It grows slowly – usually on the head, neck or upper torso – and can become ulcerated as it grows.

#### Squamous cell carcinoma



These cancers grow over a period of weeks or months and may spread to other parts of the body if not treated promptly. They occur most often (but not only) on areas exposed to the sun. This can include the head, neck, hands and forearms. These cancers look like thickened, red scaly spots.

#### Melanoma

Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer, caused by sunburn during our early years. Each year in Australia, nearly 10,000 new cases are diagnosed, with 1,200 people dying from this disease every year. Melanoma develops over weeks to months. If caught early, it is usually curable. However, if it spreads to other parts of the body, it can be very difficult to cure.



Melanoma appears as a new spot or as an existing spot, freckle or mole that changes colour, size or shape. It usually has an irregular, smudgy outline and is often more than one colour. You can prevent melanoma by not getting sunburnt. Even mild sunburn can cause skin cell damage that can lead to melanoma.

### **Checking for skin cancers**

Try to spend 15 minutes each month checking your skin. Through regular checking, you will get to know your skin and will notice any changes. Pay particular attention to your arms, legs, face, neck, back, shoulders and the back of your hands.

A skin cancer can be:

- A spot that looks different from others around it
- A new or unusual looking mole, freckle or sore
- A spot, mole or freckle that has changed in colour, shape or size
- A flat spot.

If you notice anything new or unusual on your skin, see your doctor.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- The Cancer Council Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria

### **Things to remember**

- Skin cancer is almost totally preventable.
- Ninety-five per cent of skin cancers are treatable if found early.
- Get into the habit of checking your skin regularly for signs of skin cancer.
- If you notice anything new or unusual on your skin, see your doctor.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Cancer Council Victoria

**Copyright** © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel ([www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

