

# Health & Medicine

## The Signs and Risks of Skin Cancer



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As May is National Skin Cancer Awareness Month, it is a fitting time to learn more about the types of skin cancer and how to reduce the risk factors for developing them. Skin cancer is the most prevalent cancer in the United States, greatly exceeding the combined number of breast, lung and colon cancers diagnosed each year.

Basal cell skin cancer is the most common. A basal cell cancer looks like a pimple or pink mark that just won't go away. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, basal cell skin cancer affects two million Americans each year. This cancer is caused by overgrowth of cells at the bottom-most layer of skin called the epidermis. Basal cell skin cancer usually affects skin areas which receive the most sun exposure, such as the face, scalp, neck, chest, back and arms. If not treated, it grows larger until it is painful, bleeding and disfiguring. Treatment consists of office-based surgery performed with a local anesthetic by a dermatologist. Treatment is usually straightforward and it is rare for basal cell cancer to spread elsewhere.

The second most common form is squamous cell skin cancer, appearing as a rough spot which never heals. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, squamous cell skin cancer affects 700,000 Americans. Like basal cell skin cancer, squamous cell skin cancer also is caused by overgrowth of cells in the epidermis layer and usually affects areas with high sun exposure. Without treatment, it grows larger and may also spread within the lymphatic system to other parts of the body. The treatment of squamous cell carcinoma is similar to the treatment of basal cell carcinoma. The complete cure rate for squamous cell carcinoma is very high when treated.

Melanoma is a cancer of melanocytes, which are cells in the epidermis that produce pigment. All people, including Caucasians, have melanocytes. According to the National Cancer Institute, every year more than 68,000 Americans are diagnosed with melanoma. Untreated, it can spread throughout the body and in 2010 this caused 8,700 deaths in the U.S. Melanoma occurs in adults of all ages and in rare cases can occur in children.

Melanoma appears like a mole with uneven pigmentation, an irregular border and usually has a diameter greater than six millimeters. Any mole whose appearance changes over a short period of time should be evaluated by a dermatologist. Surgery to remove the tumor is the primary treatment for melanoma, though additional therapies may be necessary if the condition is advanced.

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Risk factors for all types of skin cancer include excessive sun exposure, a history of sunburns and the use of tanning beds. People with fair skin are particularly at risk. People with a high number of moles or a family history of melanoma are particularly at risk for this form of skin cancer.

The best way to prevent skin cancer is to avoid unnecessary exposure to the sun. When outdoors, wear sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 and try to remain in shaded areas. Reapply sunscreen every few hours to ensure adequate protection, especially when swimming. Wide-brimmed hats provide additional protection.

Early detection of skin cancer greatly improves a patient's chances for successful treatment. In the case of basal cell and squamous cell skin cancer, early detection allows treatment to be performed while the lesion is small and leads to a better cosmetic outcome—a critical issue for lesions which involve the face. With melanoma, early detection can be life-saving. If you have any lesions which appear suspicious, such as an irregular or uneven mole; a large number of moles overall; a pimple or pink spot that doesn't go away; chronic rough areas of skin; or any skin growths which have changed in a short period of time, consult a dermatologist.

*Dr. David Nieves is a Board Certified dermatologist and a Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology. He received his Doctor of Medicine from the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to serving on the medical staff at Windsor Dermatology, he is a member of the Attending Staff at the University Medical Center at Princeton. Windsor Dermatology has a team of Board Certified physicians experienced in the diagnosis and treatment of skin cancers. To learn more, visit [www.WindsorDermatology.com](http://www.WindsorDermatology.com) or call 609.443.4500.*