

Diagnosing Melanoma Skin Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'Diagnosing melanoma skin cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

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- Questions for your doctor

Melanoma tests

If you have a mole that you think may be a melanoma you will need to go to your GP. If there is any reason to think the mole may be becoming cancerous, you will need to have the whole mole removed and looked at under a microscope. This is called an excision biopsy. It is the only test that can accurately diagnose melanoma.

If the mole is a suspected melanoma, the referral guidelines say you should be urgently referred to a specialist clinic or hospital to have the mole removed. Having the mole removed in hospital means there is less risk of leaving any cancerous tissue behind if it does turn out to be a melanoma.

Having your mole removed

First you have an injection of local anaesthetic into the area where the mole is. The doctor then cuts out the whole mole and sends it off to the laboratory. You then have a few stitches put in. If the mole contained any cancerous cells you may have to have more tests. If not, you will not need any more treatment.

If your mole was found to contain cancerous or pre-cancerous cells, the biopsy will be looked at very closely in the laboratory to make sure that all abnormal cells have been removed. If your cancerous mole was not completely removed, you will be asked to go into hospital for an operation called a wide local excision. You usually have this under local anaesthetic but in some circumstances your doctor may suggest a general anaesthetic. The operation is much the same as having your mole removed. But the surgeon will take more tissue away.

Further tests for melanoma

If you are found to have melanoma, your doctor will check how deep the melanoma is. The deeper the melanoma has grown, the more likely it is that they could have spread somewhere else in the body. You



may need some more tests to find out whether the melanoma has spread.

Tests you may have

In most cases you will only need blood tests and a chest X-ray. If you have particular symptoms that your specialist thinks need investigating, you might have a scan.

Sentinel node biopsy

If you have any lymph nodes near the melanoma that are enlarged, your specialist will want to remove them. If your lymph nodes seem normal, you may have a sentinel node biopsy. Your doctor uses a dye injected close to the tumour to find the first lymph node the dye reaches. This is the sentinel node. Your doctor will remove it and send it off to the lab. If it contains cancer cells, you will need another operation to remove the other lymph nodes in the area.

After the tests

Your test results are bound to take a little time, even if only a day or two. You will probably feel very anxious time during this time. It may help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

Questions for your doctor on diagnosing melanoma

- I have a strange-looking mole - should I go to hospital to have it removed?
- Should a margin of healthy tissue be removed from around the mole?
- What happens if I don't have the mole removed?
- Who will take my stitches out, and when?
- Who will give me the results, and when?
- What follow up appointments will I need?
- What should I look for in between follow up appointments?
- Who should I contact if I feel I need to see a specialist before my next appointment?
- You've told me I have had a melanoma - what is the chance of it coming back?
- How thick is my melanoma?
- Is it ulcerated, or is there regression? If so, what does this mean for me?
- How likely is it that it will come back?
- Am I likely to need any more surgery - when will I have this?
- Will I need a skin graft?
- Will I need any other tests or investigations?
- Will the tests show whether I have cancer anywhere else?
- Should I have a sentinel node biopsy?
- Are any of the tests painful or do they have side effects?
- Can I go back to work, and when?
- Can this diagnosis affect my family/children – can they inherit melanoma?
- Would it benefit me to have all my moles removed?
- Do I have an increased chance of getting another melanoma?



Notes

More information

For more information about melanoma skin cancer, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in October 2010. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2010. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).