

Melanoma: Understanding the deadly skin cancer.

Steven Portik*

Department of Radiotherapy, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Netherlands

Introduction

Melanoma, a type of skin cancer that originates in melanocytes, the pigment-producing cells of the skin, poses a significant threat to public health globally. Despite accounting for a small fraction of all skin cancer cases, melanoma is responsible for a disproportionate number of skin cancer-related deaths due to its aggressive nature and tendency to metastasize. This article aims to shed light on the causes, risk factors, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention strategies associated with melanoma, emphasizing the importance of early detection and intervention in combating this potentially lethal disease [1, 2].

Melanoma arises when melanocytes, the cells responsible for producing melanin, the pigment that gives skin its color, undergo malignant transformation. While melanoma can develop anywhere on the body, it most commonly occurs on sun-exposed areas, such as the face, neck, chest, back, and legs. Melanoma can also develop in areas that are not typically exposed to sunlight, including the palms, soles, under the nails, and mucous membranes. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from sunlight or artificial sources, such as tanning beds, is the primary environmental risk factor for melanoma. Other factors that increase the risk of melanoma include: Individuals with fair skin, light hair, and blue or green eyes are at higher risk due to reduced melanin production and less natural protection against UV radiation [3, 4].

History of Sunburns: Severe sunburns, especially during childhood or adolescence, increase the risk of developing melanoma later in life. Having a family member with melanoma increases the risk of developing the disease. Individuals with a history of melanoma or other skin cancers are at increased risk of developing subsequent melanomas. Conditions or medications that suppress the immune system can increase the risk of melanoma. Early detection of melanoma is critical for favorable outcomes. Common signs and symptoms of melanoma include: Moles with irregular shapes or uneven borders. Moles with blurred, jagged, or notched edges. Moles that exhibit multiple colors or shades of brown, black, blue, red, or white. Moles larger than the size of a pencil eraser (6 millimeters) or any new or changing mole should be evaluated [5, 6].

Skin Biopsy: Removal of a sample of suspicious tissue for examination under a microscope to confirm the presence of melanoma and determine its characteristics, such as thickness and subtype. A non-invasive technique that uses a specialized magnifying lens to evaluate skin lesions for

features suggestive of melanoma. Treatment for melanoma depends on the stage of the disease, as well as factors such as tumor thickness, ulceration, and genetic mutations. Treatment modalities for melanoma may include: Surgical excision of the melanoma and a surrounding margin of normal tissue is the primary treatment for early-stage melanomas. Drugs that boost the body's immune response to target and destroy cancer cells, such as checkpoint inhibitors (e.g., pembrolizumab, nivolumab) and interleukin-2 (IL-2) [7, 8].

Targeted Therapy: Drugs that specifically target genetic mutations in melanoma cells, such as BRAF inhibitors (e.g., vemurafenib, dabrafenib) and MEK inhibitors (e.g., trametinib, cobimetinib). Use of high-energy beams to target and destroy cancer cells, particularly in cases where surgery is not feasible or for palliative treatment of advanced disease. Systemic drugs that kill rapidly dividing cancer cells, although they are less commonly used in melanoma due to limited efficacy compared to other treatment options. Preventing melanoma involves adopting sun-safe behaviors and minimizing exposure to UV radiation. Use broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher, wear protective clothing, seek shade during peak sun hours, and avoid indoor tanning beds. Regularly examine your skin for new or changing moles, and promptly report any concerning lesions to a healthcare provider. Undergo annual skin examinations by a dermatologist, especially if you have risk factors for melanoma [9, 10].

Conclusion

Melanoma is a formidable adversary, capable of metastasizing and threatening life if left untreated. However, with early detection, timely intervention, and advances in treatment modalities such as surgery, immunotherapy, and targeted therapy, the prognosis for patients with melanoma has improved significantly in recent years. By raising awareness of risk factors, promoting sun-safe behaviors, and advocating for regular skin examinations, we can work together to prevent melanoma, detect it at its earliest stages, and ultimately save lives.

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*Correspondence to: Steven Portik, Department of Neurosurgery, Jena University Hospital, Germany, E mail: steven@portik.nl

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