

Women's Cancer Information Project

Coordinated by the European Institute of Women's Health

Moles

Everyone has moles. They can appear anywhere on the skin, alone or in groups. They are normally brown in colour and can be various sizes and shapes. The brown colour is caused by melanin. Most moles appear during the first 20 years of a person's life. As the years pass, moles usually change slowly, becoming raised and lighter in colour. Some may never change. Moles may darken, which can happen after exposure to the sun and sometimes during therapy with certain steroid drugs. During the teen years and pregnancy, moles tend to become darker and larger and new ones may appear. It is important to remember that not all moles look alike.

- They may be skin-coloured or pink, light tan to brown, and even blue-black.
- The shape may also vary – they can be round or oval, or the shape may be irregular.
- They may be flat or raised, large or small, with or without hairs.

Some moles may develop into a form of skin cancer known as malignant melanoma. Sunburns may increase the risk of melanoma. Moles that appear at birth are called congenital nevi. When such a mole is more than eight inches in diameter, it poses the greatest risk of skin cancer. Moles known as atypical moles/dysplastic moles are larger than average – usually larger than a pencil sharpener- and irregular in shape. They tend to have uneven colour. These moles tend to be hereditary. Persons with atypical moles may have a greater than average chance of developing malignant melanoma. Moles should always be checked regularly for any changes. Use the **ABCD** rule to help you remember what to look for when inspecting your moles. **A**symmetry: when one half of the mole does not match the other half. **B**order irregularity: when the edges are ragged or blurred. **C**olour: when the colour is not the same all over. **D**iameter: when the mole is greater than one quarter of an inch in size. If you notice any changes while examining your moles (using the ABCD rule) then you should consult your doctor immediately! Remember! The majority of moles and other blemishes are noncancerous (benign). Occasionally though a mole may be a cancerous growth. Therefore it is best to get medical advice if a mole changes in size, shape, or colour, or any other blemish is out of the ordinary. After a person reaches middle age, other dark areas may appear that are not moles. These brown, wart-like growths that appear on the face or trunk and look as if they have been stuck to the skin may be seborrheic keratoses. Multiple small grey brownspots that may appear on the wrists, back of hands, forearms and face could be actinic lentiginos. These are also called liver spots or age spots. Seborrheic keratoses and actinic lentiginos are very easily diagnosed by a doctor and are not cancerous.

Freckles

You may notice darkened spots that are not moles. The most common of these are freckles. Sun exposure may make freckles darker and they may fade in winter. Freckles usually are limited to sun exposed areas like the face, neck and upper back. Blondes and redheads freckle more easily.
