

Women's Cancer Information Project

Coordinated by the European Institute of Women's Health

WHAT IS SKIN CANCER?

It is a disease where cancer (**malignant**) cells are found in the outer layer of the skin (epidermis). Skin cancers can develop from a build-up of sun exposure over the years.

There are 3 types of skin cancer.

1. Basal cell carcinoma is a type of skin cancer that occurs on areas exposed to the sun. People with fair complexions who do not tan easily, are most at risk. Basal cell cancers do not usually spread through the body although it can spread below to the bone.

Normally it's not life threatening but should be treated immediately.

Causes: Overexposure to ultra violet (UV) rays of the sun.

Diagnosis: Biopsy which is the removal by surgery of a sample of tissue for examination under a microscope to check for cancer. This is a simple and quick procedure. If the growth was only partially removed by the biopsy and is found to be cancerous, then the entire growth will be removed.

Warning Signs: How do you identify basal cell carcinoma? It often appears as a small fleshy, translucent bump on the head, neck or hands and has a smooth pearly appearance.

2. Squamous cell carcinoma is a type of skin cancer that normally develops on areas exposed to the sun. It can spread to other parts of the body. Most cases of squamous cell cancers can be cured, if detected early.

Causes: Overexposure to UV rays of the sun.

Diagnosis: Biopsy.

Warning Signs: How do you identify squamous cell carcinoma? Often this cancer appears as a firm red bump, and may feel scaly with red patches. It is typically found on the top of the nose, forehead, lower lip and hands. Over 90% of the above types of skin cancer can be cured. However they must be treated promptly.

3. Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer and can be fatal if left untreated.

If untreated it spreads to other organs, especially the liver, lungs, bones and brain. It accounts for 5% of all new skin cancer cases in Ireland.

There has been a 6-7% increase in deaths due to melanoma in Ireland with over 350 new cases every year.

Melanoma begins in the skin cells which produce the dark protective pigment called melanin. Melanoma cells usually continue to produce melanin. This is why such cancers can appear in mixed shades of tan, brown and black.

Melanoma may begin in or near a mole or other dark spot (e.g. freckle). It has a tendency to spread quickly. Melanomas may turn red, blue or white and they also might crust and bleed.

In women, melanomas commonly occur on the arms and legs, while in men they may develop on the back.

Causes: Intermittent intense exposure to UV rays of the sun. Repeated sunburn.

Diagnosis: Biopsy.

Warning Signs: How do you Identify malignant melanomas?

Most melanomas start on a pigmented patch such as a mole or a freckle. Watch out for itchiness or change in the size, height, shape, colour, texture, or sensation of a mole.