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Moles

What are moles?

Moles refer to a type of brown spot on the skin. Almost everyone has moles. They are usually brown in color and can be of variable size and shape. Most moles appear during the first 20 years of a person's life. Moles typically start out small and flat. With time most grow larger and some rise up on the skin. They are usually tan to dark brown in color, but can be gray, pink or flesh colored. Moles that are present in childhood often grow proportionately as the child grows. Later in life many moles will slowly disappear. Moles may darken and increase in size and number with sun exposure, birth control pills and pregnancy.

What is a melanoma?

A mole that is cancerous is called a melanoma. Certain types of moles have a higher-than-average risk of becoming cancerous. Moles that are present at birth (congenital moles) may be more likely to develop a melanoma than moles that appear after birth. The larger these congenital moles are, the greater is the risk for developing melanoma. This risk is minimal when the moles are very small. Atypical moles (also called "dysplastic") are also at greater risk of developing into melanomas. Atypical moles are usually larger than average (usually larger than a pencil eraser) and often have an irregular shape. They also tend to have uneven color and, or uneven borders. Atypical moles often are found in multiple family members.

If a melanoma is diagnosed and treated early enough, it can be cured. If diagnosed and treated too late, it can lead to one's death. It is very important to recognize the signs of a melanoma so that an early diagnosis can be made. Everyone should learn to recognize the worrisome signs of melanoma and perform monthly self-skin exams. Take a photo of your back, and other areas to use as reference comparisons for your monthly exams.

When should I be worried that a mole might be cancerous?

The ABCDE's of moles can help you recognize the early warning signs of malignant melanoma.

The following should raise concerns about a mole being cancerous.

A = ASYMMETRY: when one half of the mole doesn't match the other half.

B = BORDER: when the border or edges of the mole are ragged, blurred or irregular.

C = COLOR: when the mole is several different colors (shades of brown, black, red, white or blue).

D = DIAMETER: when the diameter of a mole is larger than 6mm (about the size of a pencil eraser).

E = EVOLVING: meaning something about the mole is changing (appearance, or symptoms – see below)

Other danger signs of melanoma include rapid changes in size or color of a mole, or moles that itch, bleed or are painful or sensitive to touch. If you have a mole that has any of the above features a dermatologist should check it promptly. If there is a concern that a mole might be cancerous, it should be biopsied so that it can be examined under a microscope. If the microscopic exam reveals it to be a melanoma, additional surgery is required.

Other Pigmented Spots on the Skin

Not all brown spots on the skin are moles or melanoma. Other common brown spots include freckles, seborrheic keratoses and lentigines. **Freckles** are the most common of these spots. Freckles are usually found on sun-exposed areas, such as the face, neck and upper back. Blondes and redheads freckle most easily. **Seborrheic keratoses** are brown, wart-like growths that appear on the face or trunk and look as if they have been stuck to the skin. **Lentigines** are small flat gray, tan or brown spots that may appear on the wrists, backs of the hands, arms, and face. These are also called "liver spots" or "age spots," though they have nothing to do with liver or age. Sun-exposure and tanning beds can cause them.

