

Skin Cancer and Melanoma

Skin cancer, the most common cancer in Ireland, yet arguably the most preventable. Here, Assistant Director of Nursing Services at the Marie Keating Foundation, Bernie Carter shares with us the current status of skin cancer in Ireland today, how we can all do our part to protect our skin from the harmful rays of the sun and sunbeds, and signposts to the resources that can help us reduce our risk.



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Skin Cancer in Ireland

Each year in Ireland, almost 13,000 people are diagnosed with skin cancer. Skin cancer accounts for over one-third of all cancers diagnosed annually. This is twice the number of 10 years ago and the numbers are expected to double by 2040 according to our National Cancer Registry. Yet most skin cancers could be prevented. Nine out of every ten skin cancers are caused by UV rays from the sun or sunbeds.

What is skin cancer?

There are 2 main types of skin cancer: Non melanoma skin cancer and melanoma skin cancer.

Non melanoma skin cancer includes:

- basal cell skin cancer - this is also called basal cell carcinoma (BCC)
- squamous cell skin cancer - this is also called squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)

some other rare types, Non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) is much more common but less aggressive than melanoma skin cancer. It slowly progresses over months or years and accounts for 11,763 cases each year in Ireland

Melanoma Skin Cancer

Melanoma is the least common but the most serious form of skin cancer because it is more likely to spread (metastasis) from the skin to other parts of the body than non-melanoma skin cancer. It accounts for over 1,156 cases each year in Ireland. It is the 5th most common cancer in Ireland after non-melanoma skin and Ireland has one of the highest mortality rates from melanoma in Europe.

When detected early, it has a high 5-year survival rate of 93%. This means that 93% of people will survive their cancer for 5 years or more after they are diagnosed

Melanoma starts in cells in the skin called melanocytes. Melanocytes make a pigment called melanin. This gives skin its natural colour. This pigment helps to protect the body from ultraviolet light (UV radiation) from the sun. Melanoma may occur at any age, but it is more common in older people. In comparison to most other cancer types, it is also quite common in younger people.

The most common sign of melanoma is the appearance of a new mole or a change in an existing mole. The majority (70.9 percent) of melanomas develop from new growths, and only a minority (29.1 percent) arise from an existing mole or nevus. Hence,

it's important for everyone to familiarize themselves with all the moles on their skin and not only look changes in existing moles, but also any new spots that may appear. Melanomas can occur anywhere on the body, but the most commonly affected areas are the back in men and the legs in women.

What changes to look out for

The following checklist explains some of the signs of melanoma to look out for. It's called the **ABCDE** list.

A - Asymmetry - if you draw a line down the centre of your mole, is it larger on one side?

B - Border - are the borders of your mole uneven, jagged or notched?

C - Colour - has your mole changed colour over time or does it contain several different colours?

D - Diameter - is the circumference of your mole larger than the top of a rubber on a pencil (larger than 6mm – the size of a pencil rubber), although melanomas can sometimes be smaller than this.

E - Evolving - has your mole changes in height, appearance or are you experiencing any changes within or around your mole (eg. itching, bleeding, crusting)

It is important to know what is normal for you and what your normal skin looks like. This helps you notice any unusual changes. If you are concerned about a change in your skin, or any of the above outlined symptoms, see your GP.

What are the risk factors?

Like many other forms of cancer, skin cancer come with its own unique form of risk factors. As many forms of skin cancer are attributed to damage by the suns UV rays, the risk factors associated with this form of cancer are usually:

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation

Exposure to UV radiation is the main risk factor responsible for skin cancers. It is emitted naturally from the sun and also comes from artificial sources such as sunbeds and sun lamps.

There are 3 main types of UV rays:

1. Ultraviolet A (UVA)
2. Ultraviolet B (UVB)
3. Ultraviolet C (UVC)

UVC is blocked out by the ozone layer and doesn't reach the earth's surface. You can't feel UV rays – the heat from the sun comes from infrared rays, which can't burn you. This is why people can still burn on cool days. It is the sun's UV rays rather than the sun's heat



(infrared rays) which causes the skin to burn or tan. But it doesn't have to be sunny for UV rays to damage the skin.

Too much UV radiation from the sun or sunbeds can damage the genetic material (the DNA) in your skin cells. If enough DNA damage builds up over time, it can cause cells to start growing out of control, which can lead to skin cancer. Anyone can develop skin cancer, but some people can have a higher risk.

It's important to remember that skin damage doesn't just happen on holiday or in hot, sunny places. The sun is often strong enough to cause damage in the Ireland, even on a cloudy day.

Getting sunburn, just once every 2 years, can triple your risk of melanoma skin cancer. (World Cancer Research.org)

Get to know how and when to protect your skin to reduce of skin cancer. Tools such as the UV index can tell you when the sun's UV rays are strong, and when your risk of sunburn may be high. Visit Met Éireann to learn more about the UV index - UV Index - Met Éireann - The Irish Meteorological Service

Sunbed Usage

Research shows that the type of ultraviolet light used in sunbeds (UVA) can cause all types of skin cancer. The International Agency for Research into Cancer (IARC) has classified using sunbeds as a cause of melanoma. People have an increased risk of melanoma if they've ever used a sunbed. Just one session on a sunbed can increase your risk of developing cancer by 20%. The risk is highest for people who use a sunbed before the age of 35. Sunbed use by under-18s is banned in Ireland.

Skin Type: Fairer skinned people with lots of freckles and moles are more at risk of developing skin cancer. However, it is important to mention that any skin type can develop skin cancer. We like to say, if you have skin, you can get skin cancer.

Having lots of Moles

The more moles you have on your body, the higher your risk of melanoma. It doesn't mean you will definitely get melanoma if you have lots of moles, but it does mean you should be very careful about exposing yourself to the sun and you should keep an eye on all your moles. However, the majority of melanomas occur on new moles so remember to check your skin new moles also.



Birthmarks

Birthmarks are coloured marks on the skin and there are many different types. Most birthmarks, carry no risk of developing into a cancer. A very rare type, called a giant congenital melanocytic nevus, can develop into a melanoma if it is larger than 20cm. Check all birthmarks regularly for any signs of change

Age

The risk of melanoma increases with age. So it's more common in older people. However, compared to most other cancer types, melanoma is also quite common in younger people.

Family history

Your risk of melanoma is higher if you have a close relative who has had melanoma. This is probably partly because we tend to share the same sort of colouring and skin type as our close relatives. Your risk is highest if your relative had melanoma when they were younger than 30 and if more than one first degree relative (brother, sister, mother, father, child) have had melanoma.

Genetic risk for Melanoma

Some families tend to have large numbers of moles, or moles that are unusual (atypical moles). The atypical moles tend to be an irregular shape or colour and may be larger than usual. An inherited condition called familial atypical multiple mole melanoma syndrome

(FAMMM) increases your risk of getting melanoma.

People with FAMMM have:

- many moles, some of which are unusual (atypical) and often different sizes
- at least one close relative who's had melanoma (a close relative is a parent, brother, sister, child, aunt, uncle or grandparent)

The SunSmart Code

The SunSmart code is a simple list of five steps we can take to help protect our skin and our children's skin from the harmful effects of the sun while spending time outdoors.

The 5's of the SunSmart code are as follows:

- 1. Seek Shade** if spending time outdoor during the period of 11am to 3pm, when the sun is at its strongest. Always use a sun shade on a child's buggy
- 2. Slip on some Clothes made from close woven material** that covers your skin such as long sleeved cotton shirts and lightweight trousers.
- 3. Slap on a wide brimmed hat** to protect exposed skin such as your face, neck and ears from the sun's harmful rays
- 4. Slide on sunglasses with UV protection** to shield your eyes from UV rays to protect yourself from cancer and chronic conditions such as cataracts.
- 5. Slop on sunscreen** with a good UV rating, an SPF of 30+ for

adults and 50+ for children, with high UVA protection and water resistant. Apply regularly and thoroughly throughout the day.

Resources that can help

When it comes to skin cancer, it's important to know that you are not alone. At the Marie Keating Foundation, we have lots of downloadable information leaflets, booklets, videos and guides to help you navigate your skin cancer journey, from early detection to out the other side.

Last summer, the Foundation launched our first ever podcast series called the Maire Keating Foundation Talks Cancer. Our first, eight part series, #TalkingMelanoma, supported by Novartis, explores the world of melanoma in Ireland, from conversations with experts on how melanoma is diagnosed, the signs to look out for and living with advanced stage melanoma.

Through conversations with dermatologist, oncologists and melanoma survivors, we are giving you an inside look in to the world of melanoma, and the importance of information and support for those diagnosed. This series is available free of charge, wherever you get your favourite podcasts. Just search www.mariekeating.ie/podcasts/ or Talking Cancer wherever you stream your favourite podcasts.

For all other information and education around skin cancer prevention, information and support, visit www.mariekeating.ie