

## ACS Overview: Skin Cancer - Melanoma

# What Causes Melanoma Skin Cancer?

We do not yet know exactly what causes melanoma skin cancer, but we do know that certain risk factors are linked to the disease. A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. Some risk factors, such as smoking, can be controlled. Others, like a person's age or family history, can't be changed. But having a risk factor, or even several, doesn't mean that a person will get the disease.

## Risk Factors for Melanoma Skin Cancer

### Sunlight (UV Radiation)

Too much exposure to UV radiation is thought to be the major risk factor for most melanomas. The main source of such radiation is sunlight. Tanning lamps and booths are another source. The amount of UV exposure depends on the strength of the radiation, how long the skin was exposed, and whether the skin was covered with clothing and sunscreen.

### Moles

A mole (nevus) is a benign (not cancerous) skin tumor. Certain types of moles increase a person's chance of getting melanoma. The chance of any single mole turning into cancer is very low. But anyone with lots of irregular or large moles has an increased risk for melanoma. These people should have frequent, thorough skin exams by a skin doctor (dermatologist). They should also examine their own skin every month and practice good sun protection.

### Fair Skin

People with fair skin, freckles, or red or blond hair have a higher risk of melanoma. Red-haired people have the highest risk.

### Family History

Around 10% of people with melanoma have a close relative (mother, father, brother, sister, child) with the disease. This could be because the family tends to spend more time in the sun, or because the family members have fair skin, or both. Less often, it is because of a gene change (mutation) along with sun exposure. People with a strong family history of melanoma should do the following:

- have skin exams by a skin doctor
- learn to examine their own skin
- be very careful about sun exposure

### Weakened Immune Systems

People who have been treated with medicines that suppress the immune system, such as transplant patients, have an increased risk of developing melanoma.

### Age

Melanoma is more likely to happen in older people. But it is one of the few cancers that is also found in younger people.

