

Malignant melanoma

Cancer of a mole/skin lesion occurs when pigment cells undergo a malignant change which transforms them into cancer cells.

Malignant melanoma may develop from benign moles, slightly altered moles and from normal skin without moles. More than 90% of all melanomas are caused by ultraviolet radiation from the sun or solarium, while 5-10% is believed to develop on hereditary basis. Sun burns in childhood and adolescence appear to have a greater impact than sunburns later in life.

Unfortunately, Norway has a very high incidence of malignant melanoma (21 per 100,000 population), and melanoma is the cancer that increases the most in Norway (3-5% increase in new cases per year).

Danger signals of moles:

Although it may be difficult to distinguish between normal and abnormal moles, there are several features of a mole that are used to distinguish between normal moles and melanoma.

- Grows or changes in shape (asymmetrical, irregular and blurred demarcation)
- Changes in color, especially towards black
- Itches or bleeds
- Appears as a small wound/lesion that will not heal

Diagnosis and treatment:

Suspicion of melanoma is based on the way a mole looks and change in size, shape, definition, color, shades, ulceration and bleeding.

An initial examination of the mole will often be done with a dermatoscope where the doctor examines the mole/skin lesions through a magnifying lens. This makes it easier to distinguish between benign and malignant lesions. If the doctor suspects a melanoma the mole will be removed with a sufficient margin to healthy skin and sent for analysis to determine if there are malignant changes. If a spread of the disease is suspected, further examinations in hospital will take place.

Of the 1,700 cases detected annually in Norway, between 80 and 90 percent are cured. Those who once have had a malignant melanoma should be extra cautious, because their risk of getting a new melanoma is slightly increased.

Prevention:

- Avoid sunburns, especially in children!
- Use healthy sun-rules: Sunscreen > SPF 15, clothing, hat, sunglasses and shade protects.
- Sunscreen creams can give false sense of security and should protect against both UVA and UVB.
- Avoid the use of solarium/tanning beds
- Get prompt medical attention if you have a suspicious mole or a skin lesion that will not heal

Further information available at:

www.kreftforeningen.no and www.euromelanoma.org.