

Melanoma Risk Factors

While other factors-including genetics-undoubtedly contribute to developing melanoma and other skin cancers, the largest factor by far is exposure to ultraviolet rays (UV) from natural or artificial sources, such as sunlight and indoor tanning beds. In fact, approximately 65 percent of melanomas are attributed to UV exposure.

It's important to know if you are at risk for developing melanoma. The risk factors include:

- **Fair skin** - Melanoma occurs more frequently in people who have fair skin that burns or freckles easily than in people with dark skin. This is because fair skin tones have less protection from damaging UV rays than darker skin tones.
- Having darkly pigmented skin lowers, but does not eliminate, your risk of melanoma. In darker skinned individuals, melanoma more commonly occurs on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, and under the nails. Reggae musician Bob Marley died in 1981 of metastatic melanoma at the age of 36.
- **Light Hair and Eye Color** - The risk for melanoma is also higher for people with blue eyes and, especially, blond or red hair.
- **Moles** - People who have many moles (more than 50) have an increased chance of developing melanoma.
- **Dysplastic nevi (nevi is the medical term for moles; the singular is nevus)** - Abnormal moles (bigger than normal moles, flat or with a section that is flat, several shades of pigment, fuzzy, indistinct edges) are a bit more likely to become cancerous than ordinary moles. A person with a high number of abnormal moles has a higher risk of developing melanoma.
- **Personal and family history of melanoma** - A previous diagnosis of melanoma increases the risk of getting melanoma again. About 5-10 percent of people with a melanoma will develop it again during their lifetime. If one or more members of your immediate family have developed melanoma, then you have a higher risk of developing the disease yourself. This may have to do with a number of things, including a family lifestyle of frequent sun exposure, shared fair skin traits or inherited gene mutations.
- **Non-melanoma skin cancer** - People who have had other kinds of skin cancer are at a higher risk of developing melanoma.
- **Weakened immune system** - People with a weakened immune system-due to certain cancers, drugs given following organ transplants, HIV/AIDS or other autoimmune diseases-are at a greater risk of developing melanoma and other skin cancers.
- **Severe sunburns, especially while young** - Every time you burn your skin, you increase your risk of developing melanoma and other skin cancer. This is especially true of skin burns at a young age. Just one blistering sunburn can double your chances of developing melanoma later in life.
- **Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, such as sunlight or indoor tanning booths** - Exposure to UV radiation is one of the major risk factors for most melanomas. Using tanning beds before age 30 increases your risk of developing melanoma by 75 percent and occasionally using tanning beds can triple your chances.
- **Age** - Although melanoma is most common in men over the age of 50 (more common than colon, prostate, and lung cancer), it is also one of the most common cancers in people under the age of 30. Melanoma is the most common form of cancer for young adults 25- to 29-years-old and the second most common cancer in adolescents and young adults 15- to 29-years-old.