

Ocular melanoma is an extremely rare form of cancer that affects the eye with an incidence of 5 per million adults. Although rare, it is the most common primary cancer of the eye in adults. Primary means that the cancer began at that site (in this case the eye) and did not spread there from another part of the body. In most people, this cancer arises in a part of the eye known as the uveal tract. The uveal tract is the colored (pigmented) layer of tissue that is found beneath the white of the eye (sclera) and is composed of normally pigmented cells and blood vessels. In the front of the eye, the uvea is made up of the colored part of the eye (iris) and a circle of muscle tissue (ciliary body) that releases a transparent fluid (aqueous humor) into the eye and helps to control the shape of the lens. The largest area of the uveal tract is in the back part of the eye (choroid) which is located beneath the retina, the vision sensing portion of the eye. In most instances, ocular melanomas arise within the choroid. Ocular melanoma arises from cells called melanocytes, which are the cells of the body that produce pigment. Ocular melanoma is a cancerous (malignant) tumor that can potentially spread (metastasize) to other parts of the body, most often to the liver. The exact cause of this disorder is unknown, but several risk factors have been identified. Ocular melanoma is the most common primary cancer affecting the eye. However, it is a rare disorder and is estimated to be diagnosed in about 2,500 people in the United States each year. The incidence is unknown, but one estimate places it at about 5-6 people per every 1,000,000 people in the general population. This cancer can affect men and women and individuals of all ethnic or racial groups. It occurs most commonly in older individuals with the highest incidence in the seventh and eighth decade of life. However, ocular melanoma has been reported in children as well. The disorder occurs more often in people who are fair skinned and have lighter colored eyes. The rate of occurrence is 8-10 times higher in Caucasian individuals compared to people of African descent. Ocular melanoma accounts for about 3-4% of all people with melanoma and is less common than melanoma of the skin.