



Skin Cancer in People with Darker Skin

Do people with darker skin tones get skin cancer?

Yes. Anyone can get skin cancer. It is more common among people with a light or fair skin tone. But skin cancer can affect anyone, no matter the color of their skin.

How can people with dark skin get skin cancer?

Although dark skin does not burn in the sun as easily as fair skin, being in the sun can still damage your skin. Even people who don't burn are at risk for skin cancer. Sunlight causes damage through certain types of ultraviolet, or UV, rays, called UVA and UVB.

Also, UV rays aren't the only cause of skin cancer. There are other causes, such as certain medical conditions. In fact, skin cancer may be found in places on the body that are rarely or never exposed to the sun.

It doesn't matter if your skin is light, dark, or in between, you can get skin cancer.

How can I find skin cancer early?

Talk with your doctor if you see any unusual changes on your skin that do not go away within one month.

- Check the skin on all surfaces of your body, even in your mouth.
- Watch for a new mole or other new growth on your skin.
- Check for changes in the appearance of an old growth on the skin or scar (especially a burn scar).



Skin cancer can affect anyone, no matter the color of their skin

Credit: iStock

- Watch for a patch of skin that is a different color and becomes darker or changes color.
- Watch for a sore that does not heal – it may bleed or form a crust.
- Check your finger and toenails for a dark band. It is especially important to check with your doctor if the dark band begins to spread.

When skin cancer is found early, it can be treated more easily.

What does skin cancer look like on people with darker skin?

There are three main types of skin cancer: melanoma, squamous cell skin cancer, and basal cell skin cancer. Melanoma is the least common type of skin cancer but the most dangerous. People of any skin color can develop any of these skin cancers.

The most common form of melanoma in people with dark skin is acral lentiginous melanoma. This form of melanoma occurs on the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, and on fingers, toes, and nail beds.

A change on the skin is the most common sign of skin cancer. This may be any new growth on the skin, a sore that doesn't heal, or a change in an old growth.

Here are some examples of skin cancer on dark skin:



Basal cell skin cancer can look like a brown, glossy black, or tan bump with a rolled border.

Photo Credit: Hugh Gloster, MD



Squamous cell skin cancer can be a firm bump, flat sore, scaly patch, or raised area on an old scar. It can be the same color as your skin, or pink, red, black, or brown.

Photo Credit: Hugh Gloster, MD



Melanoma skin cancer can look like a dark (or black) bump. The bump may seem waxy or shiny.



A skin cancer called acral lentiginous melanoma can look like a dark patch on your palm or the bottom of your foot. Or it can look like a dark band under your nail.

If you notice a change on your skin, see your doctor. Don't wait until the change looks like the more advanced skin cancers in these photos.

How can I protect myself from skin cancer?

Have your doctor check your skin if you notice a change, especially one that is unusual or does not go away. Your doctor may take a sample of your skin to get a closer look at the cells.

Ask your doctor about your risk of skin cancer, if you should have regular skin checks, and if so, how often.

Besides your history of sun exposure and the tone of your skin, other factors may increase your risk of skin cancer.

- Some skin conditions and certain medicines (such as some antibiotics or hormones) can make your skin more sensitive to damage from the sun
- Medicines that suppress the immune system, such as those taken by people who have had an organ transplant
- Medical conditions that suppress the immune system, such as HIV
- Having scars or skin ulcers
- Exposure to a high level of arsenic (a poison that is sometimes found in well water or pesticides)
- Getting older, even though skin cancer can occur at any age

Stay out of the sun as much as you can. Whenever possible, avoid exposure to the sun from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. If you work or play outside:

- Try to wear long sleeves, long pants, and a hat that shades your face, ears, and neck with a brim all around.
- Use sunscreen with a label that says it is broad spectrum or is at least SPF 30 and can filter both UVA and UVB rays.
- Wear sunglasses that filter UV to protect your eyes and the skin around your eyes.

Don't use UVA or UVB tanning beds or sunlamps. You may hear that UVA tanning beds are safer, but this is not true.

If you are concerned about being low in vitamin D from not being in the sun, talk with your doctor about supplements.

Related Resources

[Common Moles, Dysplastic Nevi, and Risk of Melanoma
Skin Cancer \(Including Melanoma\)—Patient Version](#)

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