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## Your essential skin cancer checklist

Following her diagnosis of a malignant melanoma, the Duchess of York has spoken about the importance of checking any new moles that may appear on your body.

Skin cancer can kill you, so it's essential to know the signs and get any suspicious skin changes checked out quickly. Here we show what to look for and what to do to try and prevent it happening.

Melanoma skin cancer cases in the UK have reached an all time high, according to Cancer Research UK. There are also more than 200,000 case of non-melanoma skin cancer in the UK each year.

**Skin cancer** is basically divided into two groups, melanoma and non-melanoma cancers. Melanoma is around 20 times less common than non-melanoma, but far more serious. That's because it's much more likely to spread to other parts of the body.

The two types of non-melanoma cancers are basal cell cancer and squamous cell cancer. They affect more than 200,000 people in the UK every year<sup>1</sup>. Basal cell cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in the UK – if spotted and treated early this presents a very low risk to your health.

With 17,500 cases in the UK in 2022<sup>2</sup>, **melanoma** diagnosis is not common, but it is increasing. The number of cases is expected to grow by 50% in the next 20 years. While it does affect younger people, it definitely gets more common with age – around half of people diagnosed are over 65.

Malignant melanomas occur most often on women's legs – but they can develop on any part of your skin. By contrast, men are most likely to get melanomas on the back or chest. But they can occur anywhere, so have any new or changing mole with any of the warning signs listed below checked out.

## Who's most at risk?

Melanoma is a subject close to my heart, because unfortunately I tick all the boxes for being high risk for developing it. I have red hair – some blondes are at risk too – freckles and the sort of pale skin that only has to look at a sun ray to turn red.

What's more, I had several episodes of severe sunburn in childhood, when the highest sun protection factor (SPF) in sun cream that existed was factor 12. Children's skin is particularly sensitive, and melanoma can develop many years after episodes of sunburn in childhood. Frequent or severe sunburn in childhood puts you at higher risk for life.

Your risk of non-melanoma skin cancers largely depends on your lifetime sun exposure. Numerous non-sun-related factors, including family history, alcohol intake, smoking and taking medication which suppresses your immune system, can all increase your risk further.

Melanomas, on the other hand, seem to be more closely related to how often you've been burned. Any colouring of your skin is your body's reaction to sun damage, but sunburn is particularly risky. People who have naturally dark skin have higher levels of melanin in the skin, which protects against both burning and melanoma.

But sun exposure isn't the only risk. You're more likely to get a melanoma if other people in your family have it. Of course, this can be partly explained by inheriting pale skin and freckles, but there does seem to be another genetic link too. Around 1 in 10 people who get melanoma have a relative who had it.

## Spotting non-melanoma skin cancer

Scalp and face are the most common sites for non-melanoma skin cancers, but like melanomas, they can appear anywhere.

Squamous cell cancers most often start as a pink or red area covered by a crust or scales. As they progress, they can become tender and raised – a bit like a wart – and can ulcerate. The surface is delicate and may bleed easily.

Basal cell cancers usually start with a lump which can be pearly, pink or red. Like squamous cell cancers, basal cell cancers can crust or bleed, but this often takes more time as they tend to grow very slowly. As a rule, they are not painful or tender.

## Know your ABCDE

The key to spotting melanoma early is to know your alphabet - or at least your ABCDE. Most melanomas don't develop in an existing mole, but do look out for these changes in an existing mole, as well as any new mole which appears:

**Asymmetry** - most moles are circular or oval, while melanomas often have an irregular shape.

**Border** - look for irregular edges, or blurring of the borders so you can't see where the mole ends and normal skin begins.

**Colour** - a range of colours - browns and black - rather than a single colour.

**Diameter** - over 6 mm across.

**Evolution** - a quickly changing mole.

# The ABCDE of MELANOMA

NORMAL

MELANOMA



A



**Asymmetry:** The two halves do not coincide.



B



**Edge:** they are irregular and asymmetrical.



C



**Color:** Different shades of brown, black



D



**Diameter:** >6mm



E



**Evolution:** Change in size, shape or color.

You should also watch out for redness and [inflammation](#), crusting, itching, a change in sensation of the skin, bleeding or oozing.

## Protect yourself

Even if you've had sunburn as a child or have freckled, pale skin, it's never too late to [protect yourself against skin cancer](#). While you need some sun to top up your vitamin D levels, you should always avoid burning, and ideally tanning – this includes sunbeds, which emit UV light.

Covering up with a wide-brimmed hat and shirt – ideally long-sleeved – in bright sunlight will help prevent harm. Sun damage can affect your eyes and you can get melanoma in them – wraparound [sunglasses](#) work very well for this. Stay inside when sun is at its strongest between 11 am and 3 pm. And apply high sun protection factor cream – at least factor 30, or factor 50 if you're pale or freckled.

Practise 'slip, slop, slap' – slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen regularly and slap on a hat. Think pale and interesting – it really is healthier!

## Further reading

1. [Skcin.org: Skin cancer facts.](#)
2. [Cancer Research UK: Skin cancer cases hit record high.](#)

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