

ASCO ANSWERS

MELANOMA

WHAT IS MELANOMA?

Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer. It begins when color-producing cells called melanocytes become abnormal, grow uncontrollably, and eventually form a tumor. Melanoma frequently develops from a pre-existing mole. Although melanoma can occur anywhere on the body, it is frequently found on men's backs and on women's legs.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE SKIN?

The skin protects the body against infection and injury, helps regulate body temperature, stores water and fat, and produces vitamin D. Skin is made up of the epidermis (outer layer of skin) and the dermis (inner layer of skin). The deeper layer of the epidermis contains melanocytes.

WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

The stage is a way of describing the cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. There are five stages for melanoma: stage 0 (zero) and stages I through IV (one through four). More information about these stages is available at www.cancer.net/melanoma.

HOW IS MELANOMA TREATED?

The treatment of melanoma depends on its thickness, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. If the melanoma has not spread to distant parts of the body, surgery is the first treatment for most patients. Sometimes it is the only treatment necessary, as most people are cured with the first surgery. Other times, a patient will need additional treatment after surgery, called adjuvant therapy, which includes immunotherapy (treatment that uses the body's own immune system to fight cancer), radiation therapy, chemotherapy to a specific part of the body (such as an arm or leg), and clinical trials.

If melanoma has spread to other areas of the body, clinical trials are often the best option. Other treatment options include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy (treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth and survival), radiation therapy, and surgery. In addition to extending survival time, an important goal of treatment for this stage of cancer is managing a patient's symptoms and side effects.

Talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of melanoma treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH MELANOMA?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

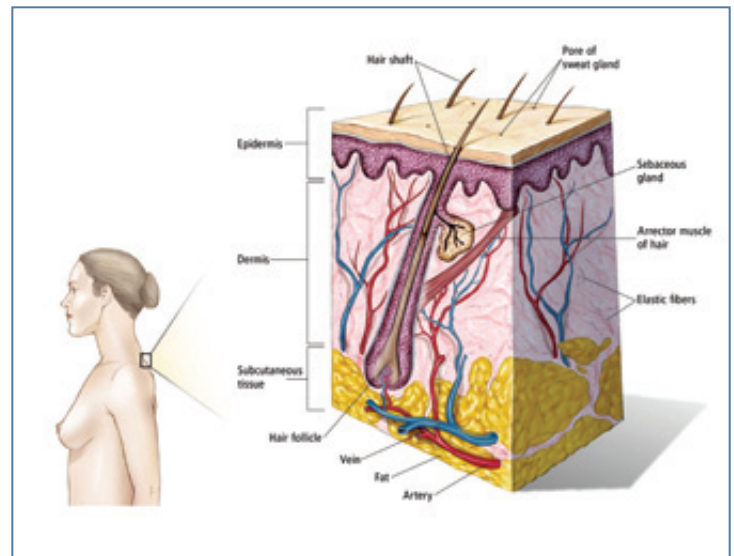


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Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of melanoma do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the melanoma?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- Which treatment, or combination of treatments, do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- If I'm worried about the cost related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/melanoma.



Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Benign:

A tumor that is not cancerous

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Dermatologist:

A doctor who specializes in diseases and conditions of the skin

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Malignant:

A tumor that is cancerous

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Sentinel lymph node:

The first lymph node to which cancer is likely to spread from a primary tumor

Sentinel lymph node biopsy:

Removal of sentinel node(s) to check for cancer cells

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue