

# ASCO ANSWERS

## MELANOMA

### WHAT IS MELANOMA?

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that begins when color-producing cells called melanocytes become abnormal, grow uncontrollably, and eventually form a tumor. Melanoma can develop from or near a mole, or it can appear in an area similar to surrounding skin. Although melanoma can occur anywhere on the body, it is frequently found on the backs of men and women 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.

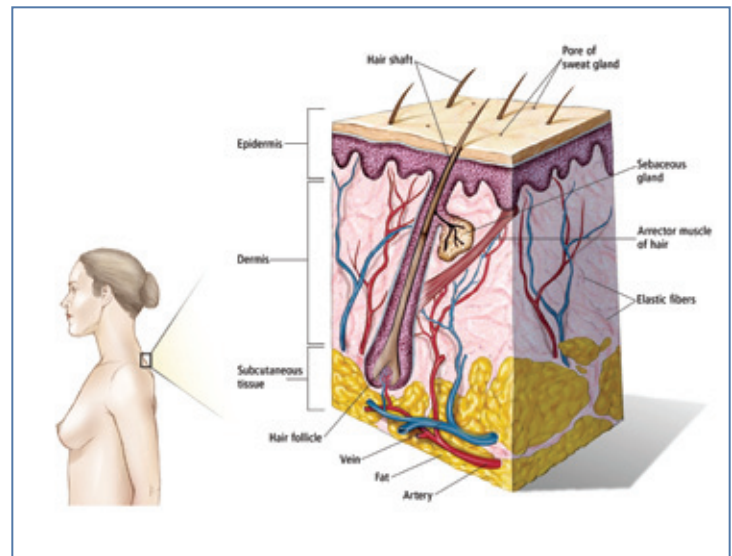


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*Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).*

### 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 if 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). Illustrations for these stages are available at [www.cancer.net/melanoma](http://www.cancer.net/melanoma).

### HOW IS MELANOMA TREATED?

The treatment of melanoma depends on the size and location of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. Treatment options include surgery, immunotherapy, chemotherapy, and/or radiation therapy.

Surgery, the standard treatment for melanoma, is performed to remove the tumor and surrounding skin tissue, and possibly, lymph nodes. A skin graft (the use of skin from another part of the body to close the wound and reduce scarring) may be necessary. Immunotherapy, treatment that uses the body's own immune system to fight cancer, may be used in combination with surgery and/or chemotherapy. Localized chemotherapy techniques may be used if melanoma has not spread beyond an arm or leg. Radiation therapy is most commonly used to relieve symptoms caused by melanoma that has spread and/or to prevent melanoma from coming back after the removal of lymph nodes. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; 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.

## 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?
- Has the cancer spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- Which treatment, or combination of treatments, do you recommend? Why?
- How will this treatment benefit me?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What is the expected timeline for my treatment plan?
- 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?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/melanoma](http://www.cancer.net/melanoma).

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*ASCO believes that all treatment decisions should be made between patients and their doctors.*

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website,  
[www.cancer.net](http://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

### **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:**

A mass of tissue that requires a biopsy