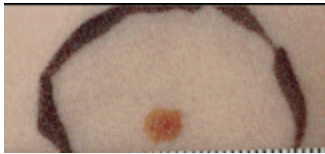


Moles

What are moles?

Moles, also known as nevi, are flat or raised growths on the skin. Moles are very common and appear when pigment cells (melanocytes) in the skin grow in clusters. Most people have between 10 and 40 moles. A person may develop new moles from time to time, usually until about age 40 - 45. In older people, they tend to fade away.



Moles are usually pink, tan, black, red, or brown. They can be flat or raised. They are usually round or oval. They can be as small as a pinpoint but are usually no larger than a pencil eraser.

About one out of every ten people has at least one unusual (atypical) mole that looks different from an ordinary mole. They may have irregular edges and the color may fade into the skin around it. These are called *dysplastic nevi* or *atypical moles*. They may be more likely than ordinary moles to develop into melanoma, a type of skin cancer. You should have a health care professional check your moles if they look unusual; if the color, size, shape, or height changes; if mole becomes hard or dry/scaly; or if the mole starts to itch or bleed.



What causes moles?

The cause of moles is unknown. It may have to do with the genes we inherit from our parents, and exposure to sun – especially during childhood – can also be a factor.

Why are moles a concern?

Most moles are harmless and remain stable over time, but rarely, dysplastic nevi become cancerous. Researchers estimate that someone with more than 5 dysplastic nevi has 10 times the risk for melanoma than a person who has no moles. The more dysplastic nevi a person has, the greater the chance of developing melanoma. Melanoma is a serious type of skin cancer that begins in the melanocytes (pigment cells). In men, melanoma is often found on the head, neck, or back. In women, it is often found on the back or on the lower legs. People with fair skin are at higher risk for melanoma. When melanoma develops in people with dark skin, it is often found under the fingernails or toenails, on the palms of the hands, or on the soles of the feet. When detected early and removed by surgery, melanoma can usually be cured. However, when detected late, the cancer may have spread throughout the body (metastasized).

Which moles are of concern?

Some moles have a greater potential for becoming cancerous. Individuals who have more than 50 moles on their skin have an increased risk of developing melanoma. The Ugly Duckling sign (a mole that stands out from other moles because it looks different) and the ABCDEs can help you detect melanoma.

ABCDEs

A is for Asymmetry. Does it look different from the round/oval, symmetrical common mole?

B is for Border. Common moles tend to have smooth, even borders. Look for edges that are uneven or notched. Look to see if the pigment (color) of the mole spreads into the surrounding skin.

C is for Color. Common moles are usually a single shade (usually of brown). Does your mole have multiple colors or shades?

D is for Diameter or Dark. Is your mole larger than a pencil eraser (1/4 inch)? Is one of your moles darker than all the others?

E is for Evolving. Check your moles for changes in size, shape, color, or height. Also get checked if your mole is bleeding, itchy, or crusts over.

If you would like to see pictures of common moles, dysplastic nevi, and melanoma, see the National Cancer Institute's [Moles to Melanoma: Recognizing the ABCDE Features](https://moles-melanoma-tool.cancer.gov/#).
(<https://moles-melanoma-tool.cancer.gov/#>)

What should be done?

People should tell their doctor if they find a new mole or a change in an existing mole. A family doctor may refer people with an unusual mole or other concerns about their skin to a dermatologist. Factors that may increase the risk of developing melanoma include:

- a dysplastic nevus
- having more than 50 common moles
- severe or blistering sunburns
- being exposed to strong sunlight (southern U.S. states) or at higher elevations (in the mountains)
- using tanning booths or sunlamps
- a personal or family history of melanoma
- having fair/pale skin that burns easily
- taking certain medications that can make skin for sensitive to the sun (photosensitivity) or medications that weaken your immune system

Please call the **Department of Dermatology** if you have further questions or concerns.

Clinic hours: 8a.m. – 5p.m., Monday through Friday

Telephone: 716-845-3378