Skin cancer

Queensland has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. One in two Queenslanders will develop skin cancer in their lifetime.

Almost all skin cancer is caused by overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Skin cancer is easy to prevent by using sun protection, especially when UV levels reach 3 and above. In Queensland, UV levels reach 3 and above all year, even in winter. Early detection and diagnosis of skin cancer is important. Melanoma is the most dangerous type of skin cancer and survival rates are greater if detected early. It is important to know what is normal for you by regularly checking your skin and consult your doctor about any new spots or changes to existing ones.

Who is at risk of skin cancer?

Everyone is at risk of skin cancer, but some people have a higher risk than others, especially people with:

- Fairer skin - a higher tendency to burn
- Increased numbers of unusual moles (dysplastic naevi)
- Depressed immune system
- A family history of melanoma
- A personal history of melanoma or nonmelanoma skin cancer (NMSC)
- People who work outdoors.

Who can check my skin?

If you have a suspicious spot or just want to get your whole body checked consult a professional.

A general practitioner (GP)

Your own GP can perform a skin check. Your GP can examine any skin lesions you are concerned about, treat them if needed or refer you for specialised care.

A dermatologist

You can ask your GP to refer you to a dermatologist. Dermatologists are doctors who specialise in diagnosing and treating diseases of the skin and can perform examinations to check for skin cancer.

Diagnostic tests

There are different tests your doctor may use for diagnosing skin cancer. You can ask which ones your doctor will use before your appointment.

Dermoscopy involves the examination of the skin with a device that magnifies and lights up the skin to provide an unobstructed inspection of skin lesions. Dermoscopy has been found to improve the diagnostic accuracy for melanoma compared with other clinical diagnostic approaches and is associated with diagnosis of thinner melanomas.

Total body photography involves taking a series of photos of the entire skin surface to track changes over time. It is a useful tool for the early detection of melanoma in high-risk patients.

Sequential imaging involves taking a series of detailed photos of a particular lesion over time to track and detect changes.

Can I check my own skin?

Most melanomas are detected by patients or their partners. It's good to become familiar with your skin, even skin that is not normally exposed to the sun. See a doctor if you notice a spot that changes in shape, colour or size, or if you develop a new spot, mole or freckle. Check your whole body regularly and ask a family member or friend to check hard-to-see areas such as the scalp, back and ears. Undress completely and ensure you have good lighting. Use a full-length mirror and a handheld mirror to check areas that you can't see easily.

Remember to check:

- Head scalp neck and ears
- Chest, back and sides
- The space between your toes, under the toenails, soles of the feet and palms of the hands.

Reducing your risk

Skin cancer is easy to prevent if you protect your skin when UV levels are 3 or above. In Queensland, sun protection is required everyday. Babies, children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to the harmful effects of overexposure to UV radiation.

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