

MALIGNANT MELANOMA

Cancer of the skin is the most common of all cancers. Melanoma, which starts in the pigmented cells of the skin, accounts for about 4% of all skin cancer cases and is far more aggressive than other types of skin cancer.

The known risk factors for the development of melanoma are: too much exposure to sunlight (especially episodes of severe sunburn), fair skin with red or blond hair and freckles, certain types of moles (nevi), family history and age older than 50 years. There is also an increased risk in people who have received treatment that suppress the immune system, such as organ transplant patients.

People who have many moles should check them regularly, at least once a month, to see if the moles have changed. A doctor should examine spots on the skin that change in size, shape, or colour right away. Any unusual sore, lump, blemish, marking, or change in the way an area of the skin looks or feels may be a sign of skin cancer. After the initial diagnosis it is essential that further sun exposure should be limited to the minimum with the use of sun protecting lotions and protecting clothes.

To establish a diagnosis and to determine the extent of disease the following investigations are useful:

- Surgical removal and pathological analysis of the suspicious lesion
- Chest X-ray
- Liver sonar
- Blood analysis

Your doctor may require further investigations depending on your symptoms at presentation.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Treatment will depend on the nature and extent of the disease as well as on your general state of health.

Surgery is the mainstay of treatment, quite often re-excision with a wider margin of normal tissue is necessary to obtain sufficient local control; lymph nodes near the melanoma may also need to be excised.

Immunotherapy is sometimes offered as additional treatment to diminish the risk of disease recurrence after primary surgical excision of the affected skin or lymph nodes. It may also be offered to patients with already advanced disease.

Chemotherapy is generally not as effective in melanoma as in some other types of cancer. However it may relieve symptoms or extend the life of some patients with more advanced disease and is often used in combination with immunotherapy drugs.

Radiation therapy is not often used to treat the original melanoma, but is useful to relieve symptoms if the cancer has spread to other organs or sites.

The foregoing information is quite generalized. The specifics of your disease and treatment should be discussed with your oncologist to establish the optimal treatment plan for you as an individual.