



**This Information Sheet provides general information about the main types of skin cancer and their signs. If you are concerned about skin changes you should seek advice from a doctor.**

## Key Messages

- Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. It can spread rapidly and can be life-threatening if left untreated.
- Non-melanoma skin cancers (NMSC), including squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and basal cell carcinoma (BCC), are far more common and tend to be less serious than melanoma.
- Solar keratoses are not skin cancer. However, they are a sign of sun damage to the skin and are a warning that you may be prone to skin cancer.
- You should regularly check your skin (including skin not normally exposed to the sun) so you will be aware of any changes.

## Types of skin cancer

There are three main types of skin cancer:

- melanoma
- squamous cell carcinoma
- basal cell carcinoma.

Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. It can spread rapidly and can be life-threatening if left untreated.

Non-melanoma skin cancers (NMSC), including squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and basal cell carcinoma (BCC), are far more common and tend to be less serious than melanoma. In contrast to melanoma, NMSCs do not have to be reported under the Cancer Registry Act 1993.

Unlike many other forms of cancer, skin cancer is often visible —making it easier to detect in the early stages. Early detection is the key to successful treatment and to reducing the impact of scars from surgery. Skin cancers that are detected early are also likely to result in less extensive surgery.

## Melanoma

For melanoma, thickness is the most important factor. In general, the thinner the melanoma, the better the outcome. Some types of melanoma develop over a period of weeks or months (they become thick fast), while others tend to develop more slowly (over months, sometimes years).

Although melanomas can occur anywhere on the body (including areas not exposed to the sun), the most common sites are the lower legs for women and the upper back for men. Some types can also occur underneath fingernails and toenails, on the palms of hands, on the soles of feet and on the scalp.

Melanomas usually appear as a changed or new freckle or mole. Often they have an unusual shape or colour or a variety of colours. However, in some cases they may not be coloured. Some types may itch, bleed or weep. Also, some may become raised quickly and could catch on clothing.

## Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)

Squamous cell carcinomas are common in people over the age of 40. They often appear as a raised, crusty, non-healing sore, often found on hands, forearms, ears, face or neck of people who have spent much time outdoors.

Squamous cell carcinomas can be life-threatening if untreated.

## Basal cell carcinoma (BCC)

Basal cell carcinomas are the most common and the least serious form of skin cancer (as long as they are treated). They appear as a pale, red or pearly, smooth lump, usually on the face or neck. Although more common among older people, people frequently develop them in their early 40s and sometimes younger.

## Solar keratoses (sun spots)

Solar keratoses are not skin cancer. However, they are a sign of sun damage to the skin and are a warning that you may be prone to skin cancer. These sun spots are flat, red or sometimes brown, scaling areas which may sting if scratched. They are common in fair-skinned people over 40 who have spent a lot of time outdoors.

## Checking for skin cancer

You should regularly check your skin (including skin not normally exposed to the sun) so you will be aware of any changes. This is especially important as you get older, particularly if you are over the age of 50. You should use a hand-held mirror or ask for help from someone else to check difficult to see areas, such as your back and neck. It's important to check areas underneath your armpits, inner legs, ears, eyelids, hands and feet. Use a comb to move sections of hair aside and inspect your scalp.

If you are concerned about skin changes you should seek advice from a doctor.

## For further information and photo examples see:

New Zealand Dermatological Society:  
<http://www.dermnet.org.nz/lesions/melanoma.html>

New Zealand Guidelines Group. *Melanoma: Information for you, your family, whānau and friends.*  
[www.nzgg.org.nz/guidelines/0141/Melanoma\\_CR.pdf](http://www.nzgg.org.nz/guidelines/0141/Melanoma_CR.pdf)

The Cancer Society has the following resource that you can order or view on the Cancer Society's website:

Take Time to Spot the Difference:  
<http://www.cancernz.org.nz/reducing-your-cancer-risk/sunsmart/sunsmart-resources/>