



Ask the Expert



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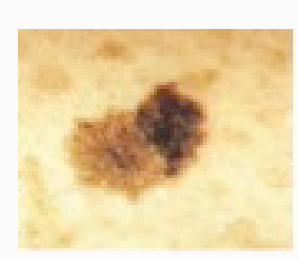
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Q. What should I look for when examining my skin for signs of melanoma?

A. Fortunately our skin is an organ that is readily assessable to the naked eye. This allows for early detection of potentially harmful rashes, skin cancers, or other skin diseases. The patient and their significant others are often the first to notice a change in something on the skin. While an annual visit to your dermatologist is vital, thorough monthly skin self-examinations are just as important. The concern we hear most often from our patients is, "I'm not sure I know what to look for."

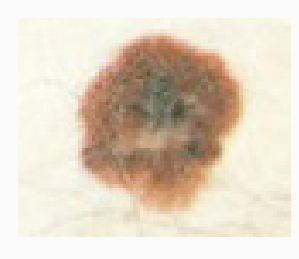
Some specific guidelines can be helpful in identifying a potential melanoma, one of the most dangerous tumors, as melanoma has the ability to metastasize to any organ, including the brain and heart. We like to begin by teaching our patients the ABCDE's of malignant melanoma recognition. The goal is recognizing melanomas at their earliest stage. Please review the ABCDE rule as provided by the American Academy of Dermatology, 2010.



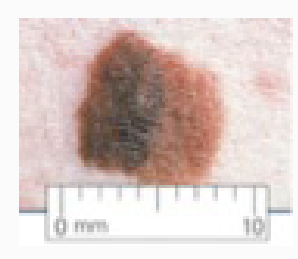
A stands for ASYMMETRY
one half unlike the other half.



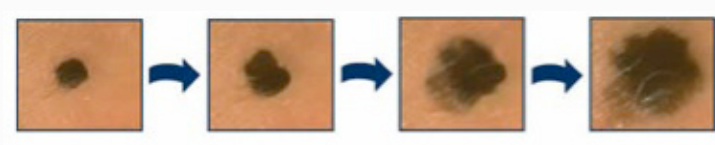
B stands for BORDER
irregular, scalloped or poorly defined border.



C stands for COLOR
varied from one area to another; shades of tan, brown, and black; sometimes white, red, or blue.



D stands for DIAMETER
melanomas are usually greater than 6mm (the size of a pencil eraser) when diagnosed, but they can be smaller.



E stands for EVOLVING

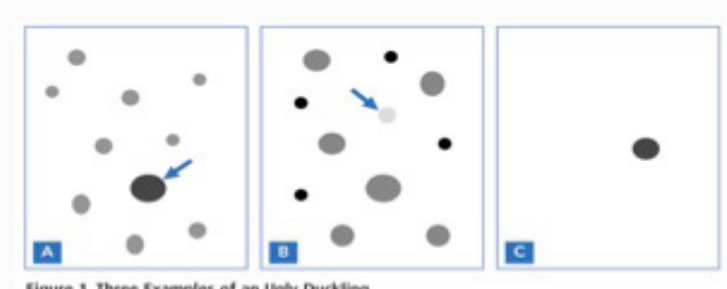
a mole or skin lesion that looks different from the rest or is changing in size, shape, or color.

(American Academy of Dermatology, 2009, ¶ 5)

Q. How should I begin to examine my skin?

A. When examining the skin, stand in front of a full length mirror and perform a general survey of your skin. Look for a mole or lesion that "stands out" or "grabs your attention". A mole or lesion that tends to stand out at first glance may be of concern according to "the ugly duckling" sign. *The Skin Cancer Foundation (2009)* best describes this phenomenon.

The doctors suggest thinking of "the ugly duckling" mole, aka "the outlier", as the lesion that, at a given moment in time, **looks** or **feels** different than the patient's other moles, or that over time, **changes differently** than the patient's other moles. The "ugly duckling" methodology may be especially useful in the detection of nodular melanoma, a dangerous type of melanoma, which notoriously lacks the classic ABCDE signs.



These three different scenarios depict "ugly ducklings" moles that should prompt suspicion. Squares A, B, and C each represent a body area such as the back.

- In A, there is a dominant mole pattern with slight variation in size. The "ugly duckling" is clearly darker and larger than all other moles.
- In B, there are two predominant patterns, one of larger moles and the other of smaller, darker moles. The "ugly duckling" is small but lacks pigmentation.
- In C, there is only one lesion on the back. If this lesion is changing, symptomatic, or deemed atypical, see a doctor and have this "ugly duckling" examined.

The best way to identify an "ugly duckling" is to perform a self-examination of your skin monthly. Instructions on how to perform a skin self-examination are available from The Skin Cancer Foundation. If you spot an "ugly duckling", see a dermatologist without delay.

(The Skin Cancer Foundation, 2009, figure 1)

After you identify the moles that stand out, identify any that meet the ABCDE criteria to determine the need for further evaluation. Attempt to get comfortable with what your "typical mole" looks like that way you can have a baseline for comparison. Benign moles tend to have a more uniform tan, brown, or blackish color. The border is regular and the lesion is roughly symmetric. Consider if you were to fold the lesion in half, the two halves would be somewhat matching. Most benign moles are 6mm or less.

When performing your exam do not forget to examine the **scalp, nails, hands, and feet**. These areas are often neglected causing recognition of melanoma at later stages.

Recent change in a mole.

It is important to note, the patients description of a change in a mole may be the earliest sign of melanoma. Trust yourself and obtain prompt evaluation of any moles that are changing color; developing erythematous or hyperpigmented halos; increasing diameter, height, or asymmetry of borders; or changing surface characteristics. Also report pruritis, pain, bleeding, ulceration or tenderness as changes within your moles.

References

American Academy of Dermatology (2009) *Malignant melanoma*. Retrieved January 15, 2011 from http://www.aad.org/publications/pamphlets/sun_malignant.html

The Skin Cancer Foundation (2009) *The ugly duckling sign: An early melanoma recognition tool*. Retrieved January 15, 2010 from http://skincancerstaging.com/beta/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=279:the-ugly-duckling-sign&catid=130:melanoma&Itemid=99