

PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN FROM MELANOMA

Now is the time to take action to prevent the tragedy of melanoma from affecting your children. The first step is to learn more about it yourself.

Melanoma is a serious skin cancer that can affect anyone starting at age 10. Among 25 to 29 year olds it is the most common cancer and the incidence is increasing rapidly. Protecting the skin from sun exposure starting as an infant may sharply reduce the risk of developing melanoma later but, because it is curable when caught early, learning the warning signs and checking your child's skin regularly for them is also essential.

Melanoma may develop from a pre-existing mole or start in a clear area of the skin. Moles are pigmented spots that may be flat or raised. There are two types: normal and atypical. **Normal moles** have round or oval shapes, are less than 1/4 inch wide, have uniform color and shade, and have sharp, even borders. **Atypical moles**, present in 15% of the white population, usually have **one or more** of these properties:

Width: 1/4 inch or more. Irregular shape. Two or more shades or colors.
Fuzzy or notched borders. Raised "fried egg" center. Pebbled surface.

The average lifetime risk of melanoma in the white population is 1 in 38 but may be much higher if your child has any **risk factors**. The risk is 1 in 1000 in the black population.

Risk factors: Any atypical moles, even one. More than 50 normal moles. Light complexion, blonde or red hair, blue, green or hazel eyes. History of any blistering sunburns under the age of 20. Personal or family history of **any** type of skin cancer.

Although they are usually not present at birth, many children develop moles during their first few years of life. Before your child is 10 have your pediatrician check his or her skin completely to determine whether there are any moles that should be watched. Starting at age 10 a complete annual skin exam is recommended for all Caucasian children. If your child has atypical moles you may want to consult a dermatologist about the advisability of having some removed, especially if they are in areas not likely to be noticed routinely.

Warning signs: Any change in a mole, freckle, birthmark, or other pigmented spot should prompt an immediate appointment with your pediatrician or dermatologist. Look for changes in size (rapid growth), shape, border, color, thickness, or surface. Or a new suspicious looking spot.

Decreasing the risk of melanoma: The best way to prevent melanoma is to minimize exposure of your children's skin to sunlight; the younger they are when they start practicing sun-safe behavior the greater the benefit. A single bad sunburn under the age of 20 may double the risk of melanoma; three blistering sunburns multiplies the risk by five. Minimize exposure from 10 am to 4 pm when the sun is strongest, make sure they wear protective clothing including a wide-brim hat. Sunscreens prevent less serious skin cancers but they won't prevent melanoma if your child stays in the sun for a long time. If you use sunscreen, make sure it is waterproof, has an SPF rating of 30 or more **for UVB**, labelled "Broad Spectrum," is applied heavily, and is reapplied every 90 minutes or less. The best time to teach children about sun-safe behavior is while they are young. When they reach age 12, start teaching them about skin cancer and the importance of self-checking their skin every month. If you don't no one will.

This information is provided by the **Melanoma Education Foundation**, a non-profit organization founded by the family of Daniel N. Fine of Peabody, Massachusetts, who died of melanoma in 1998 at age 26. Correspondence and tax-deductible contributions may be mailed to MEF, 7 Jones Road, Peabody, MA 01960. E-mail: stevefine@melanomaeducation.net. Our website at www.melanomaeducation.net has more information, including skin exam illustrations, photos of moles and early melanomas, and downloadable literature.

Disclaimer: Information provided by the Melanoma Education Foundation is for educational purposes only and should not be used for diagnosing skin problems. If you suspect you or your child has a skin problem consult a dermatologist or other professional health care provider.