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How to detect and spot melanoma

Chances are you've heard relatives warn of melanoma and heeded medical advice for preventing it. But what, exactly, is melanoma?

According to the National Cancer Institute, melanoma of the skin is one of the most common types of cancer in the US. It is more common in men than in women and tends to afflict those who have fairer complexions. Extended exposure to both natural and artificial (think tanning beds) doesn't help.

"The incidence of melanoma is on the rise -- this is probably due to living longer than ever before and spending more time vacationing with intermittent intense sun exposure," Dr. Franziska Ringpfeil, a Philadelphia-based dermatologist with Ringpfeil Advanced Dermatology, said.

Here's the good news: skin cancers like melanoma tend to be curable if they're spotted and treated early on. While you should make a point to see a dermatologist for an annual skin exam, there are certain things you should be looking out for.

A good method is to follow the ABCDE system, which stands for "asymmetrical," "border," "color," "diameter," and "evolving." These are the predominant traits that can help determine if a lesion is benign or cancerous.

- **Asymmetrical.** Healthy moles are perfectly symmetrical -- aka the right side looks and feels the same as the left side. Malignant lesions tend to be asymmetrical and will show variations in color, texture, and sizes.
- **Border.** The rim of the mole should look consistent. If you can't identify a consistent perimeter around the mole, you'll want to get it looked at. A healthy mole will have a clear, distinct border with consistent coloring.
- **Color.** Benign moles have consistent coloring, while cancerous moles have

spotty, irregular coloring - from brown and tan to black, white, and red. Note any loss of color in a mole, as well -- this can be an early sign of melanoma.

- **Diameter.** If a mole or skin lesion has grown to be larger than a pea, this could be an indication of melanoma. Healthy lesions tend to be smaller in size, and melanomas tend to be around 6 mm when diagnosed.
- **Evolving.** If a spot is changing shapes, sizes, and textures, and generally looks different from others, there's a chance it could be malignant.

According to Dr. Ringpfeil, the ABCDE criteria can be very useful in assessing your skin, ideally once a month. For hard to reach areas, she recommends using multiple mirrors, including one hand-held.

If you're eager to learn more about spotting melanoma, download the smartphone app Skinder. This tool displays several benign and malignant skin lesions and teaches the user how to spot the more serious cases.

As always, a doctor should evaluate any skin irregularities or inconsistencies. "I recommend monthly skin inspections at home for everybody and yearly skin checks with your dermatologist," Ringpfeil said. "These are especially important if you have a first degree relative with melanoma or if you have many moles."

When in doubt, go visit your doctor. The earlier you spot or detect melanoma, the easier it is to cure.

