

MOLES

Moles, or nevi, are very common. Moles are areas of the skin where there are more cells called melanocytes. Melanocytes are the cells in the body that produce pigment, or color. Moles can be many colors including skin-tone, pink, tan, brown, and very dark brown to black. Moles can be raised or flat. Moles can have hair. Moles can grow on any skin surface, including the scalp, hands and feet.

When someone is born with a mole, or develops one in the first months of life, the mole is called a congenital, or birthmark mole. About 1 in 100 people are born with one or more moles. Most people develop their moles later in childhood or adulthood. These are called acquired moles. They are most common on sun exposed areas of skin such as the face, neck, upper body, arms and legs.

It is important to pay attention to skin moles because a dangerous type of skin cancer called melanoma can develop in a mole. This is why we recommend that changing moles are checked by your doctor. Changes in moles can be benign (not worrisome) but some changes might suggest that melanoma is developing.

Fortunately, most moles are not melanoma. Generally, melanoma is rare in young children. The risk of melanoma increases after puberty and also increases with sun exposure.

Some moles have a higher risk of becoming a melanoma than others. Large birthmark moles that are greater than 20 centimeters (giant congenital moles) carry a higher risk of developing melanoma within them. These moles are watched closely and often removed by plastic surgeons.

Moles with features that are considered “atypical” also have a greater chance of developing melanoma. Atypical moles stand out because they do not look the same on each half (asymmetry), have irregular shapes or borders, have uneven color, or appear larger than someone’s other moles. Moles that have changed in size, shape or color may also carry a higher risk of developing melanoma.

CHECKING MOLES

Looking at your child’s skin regularly can help you recognize moles that are more at risk for developing melanoma. You are looking for the atypical features discussed above: asymmetry, irregular borders, irregular or inconsistent color, large size, and changing features in your child’s moles. Also look for any moles that bleed, itch, or become painful.

Remember that most moles are not melanoma. However, our goal is to prevent melanoma and noticing atypical moles early is important. Your doctor may send you to see a Dermatologist if your child’s moles have atypical features. A dermatologist is a doctor who specializes in treating skin problems.



Picture 1 It’s important to check your child’s moles regularly

WHEN TO CALL THE DOCTOR

Call your dermatologist right away if you see any of these danger signs in a mole:

- Irregular borders (uneven shape or edges) of the mole that blends into normal skin.
- Changes in color to black, blue, or red areas
- Changes in the smooth surface
- Scabs, scales, irritation or bleeding in the mole.

TREATMENT FOR MOLES

Often a dermatologist may be able to simply look at your moles and tell you if they look worrisome. If the dermatologist is not concerned about the look of your moles at your appointment, they may measure some moles and take some photos that will allow them to watch for changes in the moles.

If a mole is getting irritated frequently, bleeding, difficult to watch due to location or dark color, atypical in appearance, or worrisome, the dermatologist may perform a skin biopsy. A skin biopsy is a procedure that involves removing the mole so that it can be looked at under a microscope. Looking at a mole under the microscope is the **ONLY** way to know for sure if the mole is skin cancer.

There are many methods used to remove moles. The method your doctor will choose depends on the age of your child, the location of the mole, the size of the mole, and the amount of concern for skin cancer. Generally, removing moles in the dermatologist's office is a simple and safe procedure that can be done with local anesthesia.

PREVENTION

You can do some things to prevent moles from becoming melanomas:

- Try to avoid long periods of time in the sun and severe sunburn. The sun is especially dangerous between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm.
- Use a broad spectrum, water-resistant sun block lotion with an SPF of 30 or greater. A broad spectrum lotion blocks both UVA and UVB rays from the sun. Re-apply sunscreen at least every 2 hours and after swimming or sweating.
- Take advantage of shade whenever possible. Have your child wear a broad-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and protective clothing when outdoors.
- Do not let your child use tanning beds.

Be aware of the moles on your child's body, limbs and face. Check them regularly and call your child's doctor if you notice any changes.