

## Information for patients who have had a primary melanoma of the skin

You have recently had a small operation on your skin and examination of the sample under the microscope showed that the problem was a malignant melanoma, a type of skin cancer. You may have a lot of questions and worries, and the purpose of this leaflet is to help with some of them but not to replace a good conversation with your specialist. It is a good idea to:

- write down all the questions you would like answered and bring them to your next hospital visit; and
- bring another family member or close friend so that you can both discuss the information after your visit and be sure that you both have the same memory of what was said. This will help your family understand what has happened, which makes it easier for you to cope with a worrying situation.

## How will it be followed up?

Your melanoma was in the skin and has been removed by either one or two operations. After these, most people who have had melanomas of a similar thickness as yours remain well with no further problems, but because just over one in 10 do develop signs that their melanoma is spreading, we plan to see you back at the clinic for check-ups. At these visits, we will:

- look at and feel your scar;
- check the lymph glands in your groin or armpit to be sure none are bigger than normal; and
- give you a total body skin examination to be sure that you do not have another small, early, treatable melanoma (once you have had one melanoma you are at increased risk of developing a second so we aim to identify and treat this as soon as possible).

Some people with melanoma have a very large number of moles. If you are in this group, we may take photographs of some of these moles, and compare your skin with these photos at your clinic visits. However, not everyone needs these photographs.

If you have any worries between visits, we will always see you early, so do not hesitate to phone and ask for your pigmented lesion clinic appointment to be brought forward.

## Why did I get a melanoma?

We also want to know the answer to this question so that we can try to prevent other people developing a melanoma in the future. In about two-thirds of people with a melanoma, too much sun exposure is an important factor. This may be a childhood spent in a sunny country, or a history of many sunny summer holidays, particularly if you remember severe sunburn with blistering or peeling. People with a melanoma usually have white skin which does not tan easily but goes red in the sun. They are often fair-or red-haired, have blue eyes and may have a lot of both moles and freckles. However, about one-third of people with a melanoma do not fit into the group described above and may have inherited genes which makes them more likely to develop a melanoma. Research in this area is ongoing.

## Are my children more likely to get a melanoma?

In Scotland, one melanoma patient in 50 has a history of melanomas in a close relative. If you are in this group, your children could be at increased risk. In these families, we offer regular skin examinations to all family members. If you do not have a close relative who has also had a melanoma, your children are not at greater risk, but most families that have had a person with a melanoma become very careful and sensible about avoiding sun damage. Please ask if any of your family members have moles on their skin which you would like us to check. We will be happy to help.

## What do I do now?

Most people with a melanoma do not tolerate sunbathing well and sunburn could increase your risk of a second melanoma. We suggest that you become very sensible about getting too much sun. This does not mean never having a holiday in a sunny country, but it does mean avoiding strong Mediterranean midday sun. Comfortable cotton clothing is an excellent sunscreen so plan your holiday wardrobe around long cotton trousers or skirts, long-sleeved cotton tops and a hat.

Sunscreen creams, even those called total sunblock, have not yet been shown to protect against melanomas. They do prevent sunburn, so use them as part of your skin protection routine, but not in place of clothing. Remember that you can get sunburned in Scotland as well as on a Spanish beach, so do follow the safe sun routine during good weather in this country as well as abroad.

## More information

Please ask us any other questions that are important to you. Women may want to ask about future pregnancies, using the oral contraceptive or hormone replacement therapy. Advice is best tailored to you personally so do tell us your particular worries. Although there is a large amount of information on the internet, a lot of it is aimed at the small number of patients whose melanomas have spread beyond their skin. It does not apply to you, and you may find it unnecessarily alarming.

