

Melanoma

In some parts of the world, especially among Western countries, melanoma is becoming more common every year. In the United States, for example, the percentage of people who develop melanoma has more than doubled in the past 30 years.

Melanoma occurs when melanocytes (pigment cells) become malignant. Most pigment cells are in the skin; when melanoma starts in the skin, the disease is called cutaneous melanoma. Melanoma may also occur in the eye (ocular melanoma or intraocular melanoma). Rarely, melanoma may arise in the meninges, the digestive tract, lymph nodes, or other areas where melanocytes are found.

Melanoma is one of the most common cancers. The chance of developing it increases with age, but this disease affects people of all ages. It can occur on any skin surface. In men, melanoma is often found on the trunk (the area between the shoulders and the hips) or the head and neck. In women, it often develops on the lower legs. Melanoma is rare in black people and others with dark skin. When it does develop in dark-skinned people, it tends to occur under the fingernails or toenails, or on the palms or soles.



When melanoma spreads, cancer cells may show up in nearby lymph nodes. Groups of lymph nodes are found throughout the body. Lymph nodes trap bacteria, cancer cells, or other harmful substances that may be in the lymphatic system. If the cancer has reached the lymph nodes, it may mean that cancer cells have spread to other parts of the body such as the liver, lungs, or brain. In such cases, the cancer cells in the new tumor are still melanoma cells, and the disease is called metastatic melanoma, not liver, lung, or brain cancer.

For additional information on this topic visit

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/melanoma>