

Reducing your risk of skin cancer

Getting your skin checked

Key point

- Most skin cancers can be treated successfully if found and treated early.
- Get to know your own skin. If you find a suspicious spot, see your general practitioner (GP) as soon as possible.
- Your GP can check your skin and talk to you about your personal risk factors for skin cancer.
- You can also have your skin checked by:
 - A specialist such as a dermatologist
 - A skin cancer clinic.

Most skin cancers that are diagnosed and treated early can be cured. Get to know your own skin well. Learn what is normal for you and be alert to any new or changing moles, freckles and spots. If you notice anything new or different, it's important to seek medical advice as soon as possible.

General practitioner (GP)

If you think you have a suspicious spot, the first step is to talk to your GP. Your GP knows your health history and can:

- Help you understand your personal risk factors for skin cancer
- Examine your skin
- Treat some skin cancers
- Refer you to a specialist
- Provide care you might need, as well as follow-up
- Provide information on skin cancer prevention.

Specialist

Your GP can recommend you see a specialist for a second opinion or for treatment. Specialist doctors who treat skin cancer include dermatologists (doctors who have completed additional training in skin diseases), plastic surgeons and some general surgeons.

If you would like a consultation with a specialist, keep the following in mind:

- You should have a referral from a GP.
- Before the appointment, ask about fees and how much is covered by Medicare or your private health fund.
- There may be a long waiting list. If your GP is concerned about a spot, they should organise an early appointment.
- If you live in regional NSW, there may not be a dermatologist based in the local area, but a visiting dermatologist may be available. Your GP should be able to advise you.

Skin cancer clinic

There are many skin clinics offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. Some clinics bulk-bill for at least some of their services. Unlike your GP, a skin clinic doctor will not diagnose or treat any other health needs you may have. You don't need a referral to go to a skin clinic.

Most doctors who work in skin clinics are GPs, not dermatologists or other specialists. Research has shown that doctors in general practice and those working in skin cancer clinics diagnose skin cancer with similar accuracy. Although some may have done extra training, doctors are not required to have special qualifications to work in a skin cancer clinic.

Cancer Council does not operate, endorse or recommend skin clinics and cannot recommend any particular doctors.

Important points to consider

When you see a doctor to have your skin checked, these are the questions you should ask:

1. Doctor's qualifications and experience:

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the doctor examining your skin?
- Does this doctor have any extra training in skin examination?
- Many skin clinics and some GPs offer digital technology to assist in examining skin spots. It is important to remember that these are just tools that help the doctor make a diagnosis. The quality of the diagnosis still depends on the experience and skills of that doctor.

2. Costs:

Many GPs and skin cancer clinics bulk-bill for their services, while others charge a fee. When making your appointment, always ask if bulk-billing is available and what other costs might be involved. For example, the doctor may need to do a biopsy to test a spot, or remove the whole spot and have it sent for testing. These procedures may involve significant extra charges that may not be bulk-billed. Before you proceed:

- Ask how much you will need to pay at the time of the consultation and how much is refundable through Medicare
- If images of your spots are being scanned and stored for future comparisons, ask about additional costs.

3. Diagnosis and treatment:

If you are told you have skin cancer, make sure you ask:

- What type of skin cancer do I have?
- How extensive is the skin cancer?
- Do I need treatment immediately?
- What are the treatment options, and what are the benefits and risks of these options?
- Will I be referred to a specialist (if you haven't seen one already)?
- Will the skin cancer clinic or specialist keep my GP informed of my diagnosis and any treatment I have?

The risks of most treatments will be minor but should be discussed with your doctor. Risks can include infection, pain and permanent scarring.

4. Information and follow-up:

Once you have had your skin checked and/or any necessary treatment, you should be provided with information about:

- Preventing skin cancer
- Checking your own skin
- Follow-up you may need.

Cancer Council NSW recommends that when the **UV Index** is 3 or above, you should protect your skin in five ways:

- Slip on clothing that covers your arms and legs
- Slop on 30+, broad-spectrum sunscreen
- Slap on a broad-brimmed, bucket or legionnaire hat
- Seek shade
- Slide on wrap-around sunglasses.

For more information on skin cancer prevention and sun protection, visit our website www.cancercouncil.com.au/sunsmart.