

“What is Metastatic Melanoma?”

Overview

Melanoma is a form of skin cancer characterized by the uncontrolled growth of pigment-producing cells (melanocytes) located in the skin.^{1a} Metastatic melanoma is the deadliest form of the disease, and occurs when cancer spreads beyond the surface of the skin to other organs, such as the lymph nodes, lungs, brain or other area of the body.^{1b, 1c}

The incidence of melanoma has been increasing for at least 30 years.^{1d} In 2014, an estimated 3,000 metastatic melanoma cases will be diagnosed in the U.S.^{1e,2} The median age at diagnosis for melanoma is 57 and the median age at death is 67.³

Stages of Disease

Like most cancers, patients with melanoma are separated into five staging categories, depending on the size and thickness of the tumor, whether the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes, and how far the cancer has spread beyond the skin.^{1f} Stage 0 is melanoma in situ, or an abnormality on the epidermal region of the skin.^{1g} Stages I and II melanoma include early stage, localized disease;^{1h} Stages III and IV include advanced disease, meaning it has spread to other parts of the body.¹ⁱ

- *Stage III or regional metastatic melanoma:* Cancer that has spread to the lymph nodes within the region of the cancer (regional lymph nodes) or to the lymph vessels (intralymphatic metastases). This stage is further broken down into several subgroups depending on whether the tumor is ulcerated, size of the tumor, the number of lymph nodes involved, and how far the cancer has metastasized.¹ⁱ
- *Stage IV or distant metastatic melanoma:* Cancer that has spread to other major organs in the body, such as the lungs, liver, brain or bone.¹ⁱ

Prognosis/Survival Rates

For patients with melanoma, survival rates vary greatly depending on the stage of disease. When treated in its early stages, melanoma is mostly curable.^{1j} However, metastatic melanoma is one of the most aggressive forms of cancer and historically, the average survival for these patients was just six to nine months.⁴ Fortunately, several treatments have been approved for the disease over the past several years.

Following diagnosis, options may include one or more treatments, including surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy or targeted drug therapy.^{1k}

Risk Factors

There are a variety of risk factors for melanoma, including a family history of the disease, prior melanoma, several clinically atypical moles, as well as inherited genetic mutations.^{1l, 1m, 1n} In addition to genetic risk factors, exposure to UV rays can contribute to the development of melanoma.^{1o} People with fair skin or those that are unable to tan also have a greater risk of developing this disease.^{1p}

However, melanoma can occur in all individuals regardless of ethnic background or skin color, as well as on areas of the body without extensive sun exposure.^{1q, 1r}

Detection/Diagnosis

The following warning signs may be helpful in detecting melanoma. Any moles with these traits should be checked by a physician. The mnemonic “ABCDE” stands for:

- A = Asymmetrical shape^{1s}
- B = Border irregularity, including ragged, blurred or notched borders^{1t}
- C = Color variability, including incongruent shades of brown or black, or sometimes with patches of pink, red, white or blue^{1u}
- D = Diameter of the mole or lesion is larger than 6mm (the size of a pencil eraser), although some melanomas may be smaller^{1v}
- E = Evolution, or change of the mole, over the past few weeks or months^{1w}

In some cases, metastatic melanoma may not be detected until long after the original melanoma has been removed.^{1x} In fact, approximately two to six percent of metastatic melanoma cases are from an unknown primary origin,⁴ and may be misdiagnosed as a different primary tumor type.^{1y}

Resources to Learn More About Melanoma

- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- Cancer Care: www.cancercare.org
- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov
- National Comprehensive Cancer Network: www.nccn.org
- Melanoma Research Foundation: <http://www.melanoma.org/>
- Melanoma International Foundation: <http://www.melanomaintl.org/>
- Melanoma Research Alliance: <http://www.melanomaresearchalliance.org/>
- AIM at Melanoma: www.aimatmelanoma.org

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References

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