

Ask Dr. Mikell
By Dr. Oswald Mikell

Dr. Oswald Mikell, MD • Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry
American Board of Dermatology | American Board of Cosmetic Surgery | Physician of the Year 2008

What you need to know about moles.

Moles are quite common and can occur anywhere on the skin. Although moles are a normal skin condition, care should be taken if they exhibit changes in size, shape or color. Most moles are harmless, but in rare cases, moles may become cancerous. Monitoring moles and other pigmented patches is an important step in detecting skin cancer, especially malignant melanoma. Not all melanomas develop from pre-existing moles, but many begin in or near a mole or other dark spot on the skin.

Q: When should I be worried about a mole?

A: Moles that look different and moles that change color, size, shape, height or condition are suspicious. Many moles are hereditary and passed from generation to generation in genes. These inherited moles may be larger than average and have irregular shapes or color. These atypical moles may develop into melanoma skin cancer.

Dermatologists use a simple test for determining the problem potential of a mole. Use this A to E skin self-examination guide:

- **A** is for **Asymmetrical** Shape. Look for moles with irregular shapes, such as two very different-looking halves.
- **B** is for Irregular **Border**. Look for moles with irregular, notched or scalloped borders — the characteristics of melanomas.
- **C** is for **Changes in Color**. Look for growths that have many colors or an uneven distribution of color.
- **D** is for **Diameter**. Look for growths that are larger than about 1/4 inch (6 millimeters). This is the least important however. If the other features are present, they are more important.
- **E** is for **Evolving**. Look for changes over time, such as a mole that grows in size or that changes color or shape. Moles may also evolve to develop new signs and symptoms, such as new itchiness or bleeding.

Q: What should I be doing to spot potential problems at an early stage?

A: Become familiar with the location and pattern of your moles. Examine your skin carefully on a regular basis. You may want to consider having a dermatologist check your moles.

Q: How are moles removed?

A: Cosmetic removal of moles is a simple procedure done under a local anesthetic in the doctor's office. Cutting with a scalpel or cauterizing the mole is a quick solution. If the mole is suspicious, your dermatologist may remove the entire mole or a segment for biopsy. If the mole is cancerous, the entire mole should be completely removed and the wound closed.

Q: Is there any way to prevent moles?

A: Problems can be reduced by limiting sun exposure, using sun block and avoiding sunburn.

If you have questions or concerns call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259 (Hilton Head) or (843) 705-0840 (Bluffton / Okatie) to schedule a consultation. Any abnormality of the skin should be looked at and possibly biopsied to be sure it is not cancerous.