



Patient & Family Guide

2022

Care After Your Melanoma Surgery



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What is melanoma?

- Melanoma is a type of skin cancer. It causes the cells in your skin that make pigment (called melanocytes) to grow out of control.
- Melanoma is a serious disease that can cause death.
- If it is caught early, melanoma is curable.

How common is melanoma?

Each year:

- › About 7,800 Canadians are diagnosed with melanoma.
- › About 1,300 Canadians die from melanoma.

You are at risk for melanoma if you:

- › Have a lot of moles (bumps on the skin)
- › Have a light skin colour
- › Get severe (very bad) sunburns and do not tan
- › Have a family history of skin cancer (like squamous cell cancer or basal cell cancer)

What causes melanoma?

The cause of melanoma is not clear. Too much sunlight and using tanning beds can increase your chance of getting melanoma.

How do I check for melanoma?

Use the ABCDE rule when checking moles:

- **Asymmetry:** The left and right sides are asymmetrical (not the same).
- **Border:** The mole has an irregular (blurry, undefined) border. It may look like it is spreading sideways.
- **Colour:** The mole has multiple colours or shades of colours. It may look darker or lighter than usual, or have an area of new colour (like black, blue, purple, red, or white).
- **Diameter:** The mole is bigger than 6 mm (bigger than the eraser at the end of a pencil)
- **Evolving:** The mole changes in size, shape, and/or colour.

How is melanoma diagnosed and treated?

- Your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner), dermatologist, or plastic surgeon will take a small sample of skin (called a biopsy) from the area where melanoma is suspected. The sample will be examined by a pathologist (a doctor trained to look for cancer).
- If you have melanoma, a plastic surgeon will talk with you about having surgery to remove it.
- The plastic surgeon may also talk with you about having a sentinel lymph node biopsy. This type of biopsy is done for certain melanomas that can spread to different parts of your body. A sentinel lymph node biopsy lets the surgeon check if your lymph nodes (areas where cancer can escape and spread in the body) have been affected.

What should I do before surgery?

- Tell the plastic surgeon if you are taking any medications, **especially blood thinners and blood pressure medications**. Your plastic surgeon may want you to stop taking your medications a few days before surgery.

You must have someone drive you to the hospital and drive you home after surgery. You cannot drive yourself home after surgery.

What should I expect during surgery?

- During surgery, you may be asleep under general anaesthetic (medication to put you to sleep during surgery) or awake under local anaesthetic (freezing). You should not feel any pain.
- If the plastic surgeon thinks that the melanoma has spread to other parts of your body, they may do a sentinel lymph node biopsy.
- If the plastic surgeon needs to remove a large area of skin, they may do a skin graft or a skin flap.
 - › In a skin graft procedure, the plastic surgeon will remove skin from one part of your body (like your thigh) and apply it to the area to close the wound.
 - › In a skin flap procedure, the plastic surgeon will use the skin around the area to close the wound.

What will happen after surgery?

Wound care

- The plastic surgeon will cover the wound with a dressing. To prevent an infection, keep the wound clean and dry by following your surgeon's instructions. **If you are allowed to shower or bathe, you must cover the dressing to prevent it from getting wet.**
- If you have a skin graft or a skin flap, you may need to change the dressing. Follow your surgeon's instructions for how to do this safely.
- You may have stitches until the wound heals. The surgeon will tell you when the stitches can come out.
- The surgery may leave scars. The scars should fade (get lighter) over time. Keep the scar moist with Vaseline® or Lamaline® to help the wound heal. Protect the scar from the sun. **Wear sunscreen and cover the scar at all times.**

Activity

Limit activity (like contact sports and heavy lifting) for 4 weeks (1 month) after surgery. This will help to avoid discomfort, infection, and stretching the wound.

Medications

- Your plastic surgeon may prescribe pain medications. Take the medications as told by your surgeon.
- If you take blood thinners, ask your plastic surgeon when it is safe to start taking them again.

Follow-up care

- Your plastic surgeon will give you information about follow-up care. **Melanoma can happen again, so it is important to follow the care plan outlined by your surgeon.**
- If the melanoma has spread to other parts of your body, you may need more treatment. The plastic surgeon will give you information about this, if needed.

Call your primary health care provider, dermatologist, or plastic surgeon if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Severe (very bad) pain that does not go away with pain medication
- The wound has split open
- The stitches have come out before the wound has healed
- Very bad bleeding
- Fever (temperature above 38° C/100.4° F)
- More swelling, warmth, redness, or a bad smell at the wound site

If you cannot reach your primary health care provider, dermatologist, or plastic surgeon go to the nearest Emergency Department.

Where can I get more information about melanoma surgery?

For more information about melanoma surgery, visit:

Canadian Cancer Society

- › <https://cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-types/skin-melanoma/treatment/surgery>

American Cancer Society

- › www.cancer.org/cancer/melanoma-skin-cancer/treating/surgery.html

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

- › www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/types/melanoma/treatment/surgery-melanoma

University of California San Francisco — Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery

- › <https://plasticsurgery.ucsf.edu/conditions--procedures/melanoma.aspx>

Penn Medicine's Abramson Cancer Center

- › www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-aXzqS3How

National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health

- › www.cancer.gov/types/skin/patient/melanoma-treatment-pdq

Stanford Medicine Health Care

- › <https://stanfordhealthcare.org/medical-treatments/s/surgery-melanoma/patient-care-resources.html>

Contact

Plastic Surgery Clinic

4th floor, Halifax Infirmary, QEII

- › Phone: 902-473-7518

Notes:

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.