

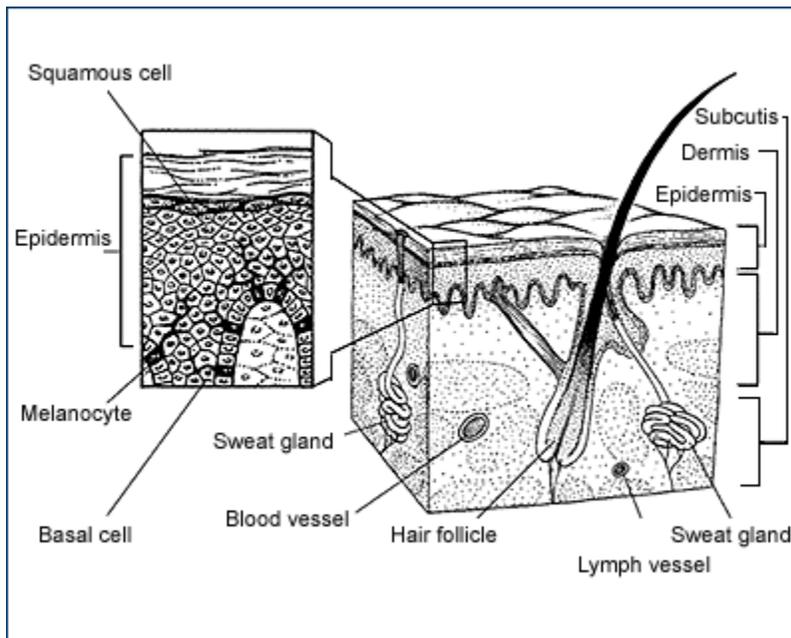
ACS Overview: Skin Cancer - Melanoma

What Is Melanoma Skin Cancer?

About Normal Skin

The skin is the largest organ in the body. It covers and protects the organs inside the body. It also protects the body against germs and prevents the loss of too much water and other fluids. The skin sends messages to the brain about heat, cold, touch, and pain.

The skin has 3 layers (see picture below). From the outside in, they are: the *epidermis*, the *dermis*, and the *subcutis*.



The top layer of the skin, the epidermis, is very thin and protects the deeper layers of skin and the organs. The epidermis itself has three layers: an upper, a middle, and a bottom layer composed of basal cells.

These basal cells divide to form keratinocytes, (also called squamous cells) which make a substance (keratin) that helps protect the body.

Melanocytes, the cells that can become melanoma, are also found in the epidermis. These skin cells make the brown pigment called melanin, which makes skin tan or brown and protects the deeper layers of the skin from the harmful effects of the sun.

A layer called the basement membrane separates the epidermis from the deeper layers of skin. The basement membrane is an important structure because when a cancer becomes more advanced, it generally grows through this barrier.

Other Skin Cancers

Skin cancers that are not melanoma are sometimes grouped together as *non-melanoma skin cancers* because they start from skin cells other than melanocytes. Non-melanoma skin cancers include basal cell and squamous cell cancers (by far the most common cancers of the skin). Because they rarely spread

elsewhere in the body, basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers are less worrisome and are treated differently than melanoma. They are discussed in [Skin Cancer: Basal and Squamous Cell](#).

Benign Skin Tumors

Most tumors of the skin are not cancerous and rarely, if ever, turn into cancer. There are several types of non-cancerous (benign) tumors that develop from other types of skin cells, such as:

- seborrheic keratoses -- tan, brown, or black raised spots with a "waxy" texture, or rough surface
- hemangiomas -- benign blood vessel growths often called strawberry spots or port wine stains
- lipomas -- soft growths of benign fat cells
- warts -- rough-surfaced growths caused by a virus
- moles (also called nevi) --benign skin tumors that start from melanocytes
- Spitz nevus-- a kind of skin tumor that sometimes looks like melanoma

Melanoma Skin Cancers

Melanoma is a cancer that begins in the melanocytes. Because most of these cells still make melanin, melanoma tumors are often brown or black. But this is not always the case, as melanomas can also have no color. Melanoma most often appears on the trunk of fair-skinned men and on the lower legs of fair-skinned women, but it can appear other places, too. While having dark skin lowers the risk of melanoma, it does not mean that a person with dark skin will never develop melanoma.

Melanoma is almost always curable in its early stages. But it is likely to spread to other parts of the body. Melanoma is much less common than basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers, but it is far more serious.

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http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_2_1X_What_is_melanoma_skin_cancer_50.asp?sitearea=CRI&viewmode=print&