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Many patients come to my office concerned about a “sore that won’t heal” based on knowledge that this might be a sign of skin cancer. Indeed, these lesions often prove to be basal or squamous cell carcinoma, the most common but lower-risk varieties of skin cancer.

Nonetheless, I stress the need to be aware of the early signs of the most onerous skin cancers: melanoma. This is a particular concern in sun-intense Florida.

By the time melanoma becomes a “sore that won’t heal,” your chance for a good outcome decreases significantly.

If it spreads to your lymph nodes, and especially to distant sites, such as the lungs and brain, it can result in death — thus the importance of early recognition and treatment.

Although much more common in fair-skinned people, melanoma can affect dark-skinned people as well. The lifetime risk today for an American developing melanoma is 1 in 32 people, compared with 1 in 1,500 in 1935.

One person dies of melanoma every 67 minutes. An estimated 7,910 melanoma-related deaths will occur in the United States this year. The median age at diagnosis is 53; however, melanoma is the second-most-common cancer in women ages 20 to 29.

In its earliest stages, melanoma often emerges as a subtle, irregularly shaped brownish spot with pigment of varying intensity (likened to a “stain” in the skin) or by a “mole” that changes in size and/or appearance. Most are not accompanied by symptoms at this stage.

The signs can best be remembered by recalling the ABCDE’s of melanoma:

“A” stands for asymmetry. If you draw a line down the center of the spot, one side should mirror the other.

“B” is for border irregularity. Benign spots should have smooth borders and not be notched or jagged.

“C” is for color irregularity. Shades of brown can be an early sign; however, beware if you see one or more colors of the American flag (red, white and blue) and/or the color black.

“D” is for diameter greater than 6 millimeters. Generally, the bigger the spot, the greater the risk.

“E” is for an expanding or evolving lesion. If a spot is growing or changing, be especially concerned.

Lastly, if a spot itches, burns or bleeds, have it examined.

Most melanomas appear on skin that is normally clothed but injured by periodic sunburn. The backs of men and the back of the legs of women are the most common locations.

Nonetheless, they also can occur on habitually exposed skin sites, such as the face and arms, from repetitive sun exposure. Rarely, they appear on areas not exposed to the sun, such as in your mouth or on your palms and soles.

Does a suspicious spot mean you have a melanoma? Not necessarily, but it should prompt an examination by a dermatologist. It just might save your life.

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