

Dr. Rick Wilcox

Coogee Skin Cancer Clinic

177 Malabar Road, South Coogee, NSW 2034

Phone: 9349 1999 Fax: 9349 8999 Email: admin@coogeeskincancer.com.au

DYSPLASTIC NEVUS SYNDROME

Dysplastic nevi are large irregular moles. Any mole (or freckle) which is over ½ cm wide is potentially dysplastic. If you have more than 7 dysplastic nevi you may have dysplastic nevus syndrome (DNS). There is a correlation between people who have DNS and people who are more prone to getting melanomas than the average person. If you have DNS it doesn't mean that you will automatically get a melanoma; it is just another risk factor (like having red hair or blue eyes or skin which burns easily).

The secret is to be alert for any change in your moles, particularly over a 6-8 week period. By any change we mean a change in shape, size or colour or any pain, itching or bleeding. It may only be one of these changes, it doesn't have to be the whole constellation. The mole may just change in size or shape; it doesn't have to get itchy, sore or bleed. If something does change, don't panic, just come and show it to a professional. Just because something changes doesn't automatically mean it's nasty. Unfortunately, as we get older everything gets bigger, darker, hairier and closer to the ground.

Change over 6-8 weeks is the take home message. If something changes overnight or over the weekend, it is probably a pimple until proven otherwise. Conversely if something hasn't changed over 12 months it is probably nothing to worry about. If something comes up on Friday don't come in on the next Monday, but if it is still there or worrying you 6-7 Mondays later, you need a professional opinion. So again, the take home message is any change, in any way, over 6-8 weeks (a new mole or freckle is, by definition, a change).

Digital photographic review

If you have DNS it may be hard to keep an eye on all your moles. One way of doing this is by digital review. If you take a digital photo of your moles every 6 months, you should be able to notice any change (if you do it any more often, it is a bit like watching grass grow or paint dry, you might not notice the change). Friends or family can take a 5 megapixel photo of your moles. Store it on your computer and then compare it to a new photo in 6 months time. If they look different come and show a Doctor.

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Total Body Photography

If you have too many moles or you don't want to take photos yourself, you can get it done professionally. Total Body Photography (TBP) is a good idea for people with DNS.

As the name implies you get a photographic record of your entire body on a computer disc. It entails about 14 different poses and costs about \$250-\$300. It is an elegant solution. You put the disc in your computer every 6 months and get a friend to compare your back with the computer screen. Every 5 years, you toss the disc away and get a new set of photos done.

\$300.00 every 5 years is a good investment to give your control over monitoring your own moles (and potentially pick up an early melanoma before it becomes dangerous).

Melanomas

Most melanomas spread superficially and horizontally initially – like an ink stain. This superficial spreading phase can last months and can usually be picked up by noting the change on photos.

It is not until melanomas start their vertical growth phase, and grow down into the skin where they may enter blood vessels, that they become dangerous. The deeper a melanoma is when it is first diagnosed, the worse the prognosis. The earlier it is detected the better. The vast majority of melanomas are cured by early excision. If you notice a mole changing and you are worried come and show a Doctor sooner rather than later. The Ostrich approach (stick your head in the sand and hope it goes away) doesn't work. Chances are it's nothing to worry about but if it is something nasty we want to cut it out before it grows too deep.

Nodular Melanomas

There are a small percentage of melanomas where the initial growth phase is vertical (rather than horizontal). These nodular melanomas grow deeper, quicker and usually have a worse prognosis. They can be difficult to diagnose and may even look like a simple pink or red nodule or pimple. They don't have to be dark. If you have a new pimple like lesion, that has been there for 1-2 months and is growing, come and show a Doctor so we can do a biopsy or excision if necessary.

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SCC's / BCC's

Non-melanotic skin cancers, Squamous Cell Carcinomas (SCC's) and Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCC's), still follow the 6-8 week rule, but, rather than look like a freckle or mole, they often manifest as a little recurrent sore that doesn't heal. They may be crusty or sore, some times they sting or bleed. People often describe them as a little 'raw' spot. They are not as dangerous as melanomas but still need to be diagnosed and treated as soon as possible.