

Misconceptions about moles and melanoma

Spec. Dr. Svetlana Djuriscic, dermatologist
Dermatological clinic DERMATIM, Belgrade, Serbia

It has long been known that moles are something not to be played with. Once a year visit a dermatologist in your town to be sure that all your “unique insignia” are benign. However, certain myths still lead us to errors that can be serious and even deadly. What are our most common mistakes and what is it that we don’t know about moles and melanoma?

Misconception number one – Only white people can have a melanoma.

Complete misconception. Data shows that Afro-Americans get melanoma in regions not exposed to the Sun: mucous tissues on genitalia and mouth, fingernails or feet. In white people melanoma occurs 90% in body parts exposed to sunlight and in darker people in only 30%.

Misconception number two – Moles that have hair can not be carcinoma.

Advances in melanoma diagnostics indicate that this rule has become a misconception. When a mole with hairs becomes a melanoma, hair still exist. It is only later, when malignant cell advance that the root of the hair is destroyed and they disappear. This means that we will not find hair only in advanced melanomas, but that the hair still exists in this stadium when the carcinoma can still be operatively cured.

Misconception number three – Every melanoma follows the ABCD rule (asymmetry, border irregularity, color change, diameter).

It is a partial misconception because this rule applies only to a certain type of moles. Melanomas which are nodular – round, do not meet this rule and they are most aggressive. Patients often overlook them because they do not meet any of the criteria which are most often mentioned in the media. Their characteristic is a sudden and speedy growth. This is not the only example. Melanoma does not have to have any pigment and then it is called amelanotic and it is manifested by unclear redness on the skin.

Misconception number four – It doesn’t work, and so it is benign.

A big misconception. Even though melanoma is one of the most aggressive carcinomas it grows without any symptoms. When it bleeds or starts hurting it is usually too late, because bleeding signifies an advanced stage of melanoma.

Misconception number five – Removing moles with a laser is the safest.

A grave misconception! Lasers are mystified, information are placed that they do not harm the skin, that interventions do not hurt and that there is no scarring after the intervention, which are all completely false and inaccurate information. With all of the above, laser always burns and evaporates the whole mole so that it can not be sent to a pathohistological analysis. As much as the mole looks healthy, only a pathohistological analysis can verify that it is really healthy. Nodular amelanotic moles look like warty knots in skin color, without the usual melanoma criteria. A pathologist is the only doctor that can reliably diagnose it based on the review of cells in the sample of the removed mole. Dermoscopy of the mole without a pigment can be insufficient to

differentiate a healthy from a diseased mole. Energy of a laser beam, or any other irritation, can stimulate mole cells to become malignant.

Misconception number six – I scratched my mole, I can get cancer.

A misconception. A mole, like any other part of our skin can get hurt and heal without any consequences.

Misconception number seven – Acid successfully removes all the mole cells.

A grave misconception. A terrifying procedure in which unskilled persons “melt” moles with acid and by doing so endanger the lives of people who believe that this is a “natural method” and therefore completely safe. Consequences are observed after a while when metastasis on the internal organs appear.

Misconception number eight – Using the solariums isn't more harmful then sun tanning.

Completely untrue. Sunlight contains UVA and UVB radiation and solariums up to 97% of UVA radiation. UVB radiation warns us that we are burning by making our skin red. At the same time it leads to thickening of the skin to make it less permeable to the UVA radiation. In the solarium we don't have a feeling that we are burning and the rays penetrate deep into our skin and lead to premature ageing of the skin and changes in its cell structure. It has been proven multiple times that the UVA radiation is cancerous.

Misconception number nine – To avoid skin cancer do not touch a mole.

This is the most dangerous way of thinking. A surgical intervention of mole removal can not lead to a bad outcome. By removing the mole cells you can never have cancer made out of those cells at that spot. Only in this was metastasis can't occur. By not touching the mole which has changed we enable the cancerous cells to penetrate the depth of the skin and enter the internal organs producing melanoma metastasis which can not be cured for now.