

Does Mole Mapping Save Lives?

The average dermatologist sees up to 10,000 patients per year. It is impossible for any medical provider to accurately remember whether any individual mole is new or has changed. If a mole is changing appearance or is a new lesion, it may be suspicious and require a biopsy to determine if it is a skin cancer. When melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer, is detected early, it is almost always curable. However, if the melanoma has spread, it is difficult to treat and can be fatal. Therefore, early detection is critical.

What is Mole Mapping?

Mole mapping typically involves photography of the entire body. These photographs are saved digitally. These images serve as a baseline and assist the physician during the patient's annual skin exam to see if any skin lesions are new or have changed.

Who is Suitable for Mole mapping?

Mole mapping is particularly useful for monitoring people at risk. This may include individuals who have:

- Numerous moles (more than 50-100)
- Dysplastic or Atypical nevi (moles)
- Widespread freckling
- A history of tanning bed use
- A history of multiple sun burns
- A history of melanoma
- A family history of melanoma

What are the advantages of mole mapping?

- The previous record can be used to determine whether a lesion of concern is new or has changed. The physician can then determine if the change necessitates a biopsy or continued surveillance
- If the doctor determines that a lesion has the criteria for removal, this can be done at the earliest possible stage, reducing the risk of melanoma and minimizing surgery
- Reassurance to the patient and their health practitioner. They do not have to rely simply on the patient's or medical provider's memory as to whether a skin lesion has changed
- The patient can keep an electronic file, CD, or prints of their photographs that can be transported to a new physician if the patient ever moves to a new location or changes healthcare providers

What are the Risks of Mole Mapping?

Mole mapping has not yet been proven to save lives. There are potential risks.

- There may be a melanoma in a hidden site that has not been imaged, such as the scalp or genitals.

- Early melanoma may look like a normal mole or other benign skin lesion, and might be missed (false negative).
- A harmless lesion may be misdiagnosed as melanoma, resulting in unnecessary surgery and alarm (false positive).
- Melanoma may grow rapidly, particularly nodular melanoma; it may reach a dangerous size before the next planned skin exam
- Non-pigmented skin lesions are often imaged during a mole mapping appointment. These include skin cancers: amelanotic melanoma, basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). At times, pink or scaly skin cancers may be difficult to distinguish from harmless lesions

Thus, while mole mapping serves as a significant aid, it is not a substitute for annual full body skin examinations by your dermatologist.