

Consumer guide to skin clinics



Cancer Council Victoria recommends that people check their skin regularly, at least every three months. Unlike many other cancers, skin cancer is often visible, making it easier to detect in the early stages. If you notice any new spots or changes in the colour, size or shape of existing spots, see a general practitioner (GP).

Most skin cancers can be cured if they are detected early, so early detection is crucial. If you think that you have a suspicious spot, here are things you can do.

See your general practitioner

It is best to see your family or regular GP. They know your full history, can examine your skin and advise you of the appropriate care. This may involve minor procedures. If you don't have a family GP, you can make an appointment with any GP for a skin examination.

Skin cancer clinics

Some people may decide to attend a skin cancer clinic, rather than make an appointment with a GP. There are many skin clinics offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. Skin clinics are usually operated by GPs and some may offer bulk billing for at least some of their services. Research shows skin cancer clinics may not necessarily offer a higher level of expertise than your family GP. In deciding whether to go to a skin clinic, it is important you find out about the services offered and the expertise of the employees.

Cancer Council Victoria does not operate or endorse any particular skin cancer clinics.

Referral

If you have a suspicious spot, your GP may refer you to a specialist such as a dermatologist for diagnosis and/or treatment. You can also ask your GP to refer you to a specialist for a second opinion.

A dermatologist is a doctor who has completed additional training to specialise in diagnosing and treating skin disease, including skin cancer. If you would like to see a dermatologist you should keep the following in mind:

- you will need a referral from a GP
- ask first what fees may be charged and what proportion of these are covered by Medicare.
- there may be a long waiting list – if you have a spot of particular concern, your referring doctor should organise an early appointment
- if you live in regional Victoria there may not be a dermatologist in the local area. However many regional areas do have visiting dermatologists. Your GP should be able to advise you.

Choosing a skin clinic

The following guide should help you determine whether the clinic you are considering is one that suits your needs. There are four main points to consider when choosing and using a skin clinic:

1. Qualifications and experience of staff

Questions you should ask

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the person examining my skin?
- Will a qualified dermatologist or a specially trained GP check my skin?
- Are employees who perform skin checks members of any professional associations relevant to skin cancer, such as the Australasian College of Dermatologists or the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners?

Many clinics offer the latest digital technology to assist in examining skin spots. It's important to remember that these are just tools. The quality of the diagnosis still depends on the experience and skills of the GP or dermatologist.

- If there are photos taken of spots/moles, who will be reviewing these? They should be reviewed by a dermatologist.

2. Costs

Some clinics bulk bill for the initial consultation; others require upfront payment. Always ask at the time you are making your appointment if the clinic bulk bills. Ask if there might be other costs.

Consumer guide to skin clinics

For example, if the doctor examining your skin believes you have a skin cancer, he/she may want to do a biopsy to test the spot or even remove the whole spot and have it sent for testing. These may involve significant extra charges that won't be bulk billed.

Before you proceed:

- Ask for the full cost of each procedure and how much is refundable through Medicare.
- Ask for all procedures and treatments, including removal of spots, to be explained.
- If you are in a private health fund, check first if the plan covers these procedures.
- If you can't afford a procedure at the moment, ask if it is urgent or if you can return when you are better able to afford it. You may be able to have it done at lower cost at a public hospital or through your GP.
- If the clinic uses scanning technology, do they charge more for storing your images and for follow-up appointments?

3. Diagnosis and treatment

If you are told you have skin cancer, ask:

- What type of skin cancer do I have?
- How extensive is the skin cancer?
- Do I need treatment immediately?
- Is the person offering treatment well trained to do so?
- What are the treatment options and the benefits and risks of the treatment options?
- Will I be referred to a dermatologist if I have not seen one already?
- Will the clinic inform my GP of my diagnosis and any treatment I may undergo?

4. Information and follow-up

Once you have had your skin checked, the clinic should also give information about skin cancer prevention and any follow-up you may need.

Ask the clinic for:

- Results of any tests you have had.
- Information about skin cancer.
- Information about prevention and sun protection.

- Information about checking your own skin.
- A reminder letter about future check-ups.
- A record of your diagnosis and treatment to be sent to your GP.

You can also get information and support from the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Things to remember

It is your right to seek a second opinion about any diagnosis and proposed treatment. A GP will refer you to a dermatologist if they feel it is necessary. You can arrange to see a dermatologist without a GP referral but under Medicare this is more expensive than if a GP refers you.

Skin cancer, especially melanoma, should be treated promptly after diagnosis. Almost all cases require specialist care. If your GP suspects a melanoma, they may refer you to a local surgeon or a specialist melanoma centre.

The risks in most treatments will be minor but may include infection, pain and permanent scarring. Whoever plans your treatment should also provide follow-up care and information.

Further information and resources

How to Check for Skin Cancers leaflet and other sun protection information from www.sunsmart.com.au

Melanoma and Common Skin Cancers booklets from www.cancervic.org.au or contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

UV-protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at the Cancer Council Victoria's Carlton shop or online at www.cancervic.org.au; click on 'Our shop'.

This information can be photocopied for distribution.

Latest update: January 2009