

Skin cancer

Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. Fortunately, most skin cancers can be cured if they are found and treated early.

Cancer Council WA recommends that everyone checks all areas of their skin regularly. Learn what is normal for you and be alert to any new or changing moles and spots. If you notice anything new or different see your GP immediately.

If you are suspicious of a spot or would like to have your skin checked there are a number of things you can do:

See your GP

Your GP knows your full history and can examine your skin and advise you on appropriate care.

See a specialist

If you would like a second opinion ask your GP to refer you to a specialist such as a dermatologist.

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 a consultation with a dermatologist you should keep the following in mind:

- You need a referral from your GP to be eligible for a Medicare rebate.
- You should ask beforehand what fees may be charged and what proportion of these are covered by Medicare.
- If there is a spot of particular concern, your referring doctor should organise an early appointment.
- If you live in regional WA there may not be a dermatologist based in the local area. However, many regional areas do have visiting dermatologists. Your GP should be able to advise you.

Skin and mole clinics

There are many skin clinics offering a variety of services and fee arrangements. Skin clinics are usually operated by GPs and some, but not all, offer bulk billing for at least some of their services. In deciding whether to go to a skin clinic, it is important to find out about the services offered and the expertise of the staff.

Some clinics use computerised systems that scan digital images of lesions and skin spots. There is no evidence that computers are better than experienced doctors at diagnosing skin lesions.

The following guide should help you to determine whether the clinic you are considering is one that suits your needs.

Choosing a skin and mole clinic

There are four main points to consider when choosing and using a skin and mole clinic:

1. qualifications and experience of staff
2. cost
3. diagnosis and treatment
4. information and follow-up provided

Note that Cancer Council WA does not operate or endorse any particular skin cancer clinics.

1. Qualifications and experience of staff

Questions you should ask:

- What are the qualifications, skills and experience of the person examining your skin?
- Will a qualified dermatologist or a GP check your skin?
- Are staff performing skin and mole checks members or fellows of any professional associations such as the Australasian College of Dermatologists or the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners?

2. Costs

Some clinics bulk bill for the initial consultation, while others will require upfront payment. Always ask at the time you are making your appointment if the clinic bulk bills and check if there might be other costs involved. For example, if the doctor examining your skin believes you have a skin cancer, they may want to carry out a biopsy to test the spot or even remove the whole spot and have it sent for testing. These procedures may involve significant extra charges that may not be bulk billed.

Before you proceed:

- Ask how much each procedure will cost in full and how much is refundable through Medicare.
- If you have private health insurance, check which procedures are covered by your policy.
- Ask if there is a fee for storing any photographic images and for follow-up appointments.

If cost is an issue for you, you may be able to have the procedure at lower cost at a public hospital or through your GP.

3. Diagnosis and treatment

If you are told you have skin cancer, make sure you ask:

- What type of skin cancer do you have?
- How advanced is the skin cancer?
- Do you need treatment immediately?
- Is the person offering treatment well trained to provide it?
- What are the treatment options, and the benefits and risks of each treatment option?
- Will you be referred to a dermatologist or other specialist if you have not seen one already?
- Will the clinic inform your GP of your diagnosis and any treatment you may undergo?

4. Information and follow-up

Once you have had your skin checked, the clinic should also provide you with 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 skin cancer prevention and sun protection.
- Information about checking your skin.
- A reminder letter about future check-ups.
- A record of your diagnosis and treatment to be sent to your GP.

Things to remember

- You can seek a second opinion about any diagnosis and proposed treatment.
- Your GP will refer you to a dermatologist or plastic surgeon if they feel it is necessary. You can arrange to see a dermatologist without a GP referral, however this means you may not be eligible for a Medicare rebate or it may be reduced.
- It is important that skin cancer (especially melanoma) be treated promptly after diagnosis.
- The risks for 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.

For more information contact Cancer Council on 13 11 20

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