

Background on Melanoma

Melanoma is a cancer of pigment producing cells (melanocytes). Most melanomas originate from the skin (cutaneous melanoma), though they can also arise from other parts of the body containing melanocytes, including the eyes (ocular melanoma), brain or spinal cord (leptomeningeal melanoma), or mucous membranes (mucosal melanoma). Some melanomas are first detected when they spread to other parts of the body, without a documented primary tumor (“melanoma of unknown primary”).

Melanoma of the skin is one of the most common cancers in the United States—among the top 10 causes of new cancer cases. While the overall 5-year survival rate for people diagnosed with melanoma is high at 92% compared to 66% for all other cancers, the survival rate decreases dramatically once melanoma spreads to other parts of the body. Very early stage (localized, Stage I) melanoma is >90% curable, while patients with disseminated Stage IV melanoma have a median life expectancy of less than one year. The ability to spread widely to other parts of the body is a unique characteristic of melanoma that other common skin cancers such as basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma do not possess. This characteristic makes melanoma the deadliest of all skin cancers, accounting for only 4% of all dermatologic cancers, but 80% of skin cancer-related deaths.