

# Early Stage Melanoma in Adolescents & Young Adults (AYAs)

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer that can occur anywhere in the body - even areas that don't usually see a lot of sun. Melanoma more commonly affects older adults but around 20 adolescents and young adults (AYAs) aged 12-24 years are diagnosed in Aotearoa each year. Fortunately, most are early stage melanoma that hasn't spread to other parts of the body.

If you were recently diagnosed with early stage melanoma, you have hopefully already been reassured that it has an excellent survival rate. But it's likely that your cancer diagnosis has come as quite a shock and brought with it a range of emotions.

The AYA Cancer Network Aotearoa have put together this melanoma guide. It covers what might happen next, things to be aware of, where to go to for more information, and the supports that are available for you.

## How is early stage melanoma treated?

Most early-stage melanoma are treated with surgery. By the time you are reading this, you may have already had an excisional biopsy where the lesion was removed and sent to a pathology laboratory for testing. Based on those results, it might have been followed up with a wider excision to remove any high-risk cells that might be nearby.

If you haven't yet started or completed your treatment, make sure that your healthcare team have fully explained the treatment plan that they are proposing and any risks, benefits, side-effects, and alternatives. Talk about whether you are able to have a support person with you during any procedures and what your options are for pain relief.



**Remember that it's always OK to ask your healthcare team questions if they use any medical terms or explanations that you are unsure of.**

## What comes next?

After your melanoma has been removed, you'll have follow up appointments to make sure that your scar is healing well and to check for any signs of new melanomas.

The frequency and length of your follow up will depend on your risk factors, the results of medical tests, and the stage of your melanoma. The check-ups will gradually become less frequent if you have no further problems.

*Ask your healthcare team if your melanoma has been discussed at a melanoma MDM (multi-disciplinary meeting). It's recommended that anyone under the age of 25 with melanoma is referred to one.*

## What do I talk about during a follow-up visit?

It's important to tell your healthcare team about any emotional or physical challenges that you're having. This is your opportunity to talk about any symptoms or concerns.

You might have questions for them. Depending on your diagnosis and treatment, these could include:

- Who will be responsible for my follow-up care?
- How often will I need to have follow up appointments?
- What are my chances of recurrence (the cancer returning)?
- How visible is my scar likely to be over time and what can I do to help it heal?
- How do I check my skin and what do I need to look out for?
- Who can I contact if I'm worried?

You are able to bring a support person with you to your appointments. It can be helpful to write down any questions that you have ahead of time so that you don't forget them.

## Questions for my healthcare team

## Helpful charitable organisations

**Canteen Aotearoa:** Offer a range of online and face-to-face support services for young people aged 13 – 24 who are affected by cancer. They provide free individual support sessions and therapy, and organise regular peer support events. Visit [www.canteen.org.nz](http://www.canteen.org.nz) or phone **0800 2268 336**.

**Cancer Society:** Provide a range of emotional wellbeing resources to anyone aged over 18. Resources include free counselling sessions, webinars and online talks, and online support groups. They also own and operate the [sunsmart.org.nz](http://sunsmart.org.nz) website. Visit [www.cancer.org.nz](http://www.cancer.org.nz) or phone **0800 226 237**.

**Melanoma New Zealand:** Focus on melanoma prevention, detection and patient care. You can request a phone or virtual consultation with a skilled nurse using the online booking form. For helpful resources and links, visit [www.melanoma.org.nz](http://www.melanoma.org.nz) or phone **0800 4 MELANOMA** (0800 463 526)

**Look Good Feel Better (LGFB):** Provide a wellbeing programme for anyone with cancer at any stage. LGFB host free hands-on workshops covering topics such as skincare and makeup. They also provide online classes and on-demand videos. Visit [www.lgfb.org.nz](http://www.lgfb.org.nz) or phone **0800 865 432**.

## How do I stay healthy and cancer-free?

People who have already had a melanoma are at a higher risk than the average person of developing a new melanoma. It can be a little scary to think about, but you can take back control by doing the following three things:

### 1. Self-check your skin regularly

You are the most likely person to first detect a skin cancer, so it is important for you to undertake regular self-examinations. Keep an eye on any changes in size, shape or colour of existing moles or freckles, or the development of any new ones. Ask a member of your health team to teach you how to check your skin and what to look for. You can also visit [sunsmart.org.nz](http://sunsmart.org.nz) and [melanoma.org.nz](http://melanoma.org.nz) for visual guides and videos. If you notice any changes in your skin or general health, then contact your doctor.

### 2. Protect your skin

For those who have had melanoma, it is especially important to protect your skin from the sun all year round.

Wear a broad-spectrum waterproof sunscreen of at least SPF 30. Apply it 20 minutes before going outside and reapply it every two hours or more if you are in water.

Use a weather app to check the UV Index and use sun protection whenever the index is 3 or above. And always follow the SunSmart messages: **Slip, slop, slap, and wrap!**



### 3. Attend all your follow-up appointments with your GP or specialist team

It's really important that you attend any follow up appointments that are scheduled for you. In between these, your GP will be your first point of contact for any health concerns you may have.

## How can I adapt to changes to my appearance?

Depending on their size and location on your body, some scars from your melanoma surgery may affect your appearance. These scars may be small, or you may have large areas of skin that are affected.

If you had a skin graft or skin flap, the skin around it might look different. This will typically heal over time and any colour differences will start to fade.

Some people find it difficult to adjust if they have had a change in their appearance after surgery. At first, you may feel more self-conscious than you did before. Make sure that you treat yourself with compassion and kindness. Who you are is so much more than how you look.

## Who can I talk to?

A melanoma diagnosis can have both a physical and emotional impact. It's not uncommon to experience feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, or disbelief. You may feel fearful about your melanoma coming back. With time these emotions will often ease. Eating well, and getting enough sleep and exercise can all help.

Support is available if you need it. Try talking to a trusted friend or family member. Or you can seek support from a trained counsellor or psychologist either through your healthcare team or an organisation such as Canteen or the Cancer Society.

*'Talking about your experience with loved ones and letting them know how you feel is a great way of dealing with your feelings.'*

- Young person with cancer



Check out our publication 'Caring for Your Emotional Health and Wellbeing After Cancer'. It provides advice to young people on managing any fears and worries that they may have as they navigate life after cancer treatment. You can find this (and many other resources) at [www.ayacancernetwork.org.nz](http://www.ayacancernetwork.org.nz)



## Where can I learn more?

If you would like more detailed information about how melanoma develops, is diagnosed, and is treated, we highly recommend reading the Cancer Society's 'Early Stage Melanoma of the Skin' booklet available at [www.cancer.org.nz](http://www.cancer.org.nz) and the comprehensive guide produced by Melanoma New Zealand; 'Understanding Early Melanoma' available at [www.melanoma.org.nz](http://www.melanoma.org.nz)



Checklist	Yes	No
I know the type of melanoma I was diagnosed with and what stage it is	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand my prognosis and the chance of recurrence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know who is on my treating team and their roles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am aware of how to reduce my risk of developing skin cancers in the future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been shown how to check my skin for changes and told how regularly I should do this	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand what my follow up plan is and who to contact if I have questions or concerns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am aware of the resources and support services that are available for me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>