AYA CANCER NETWORK AOTEAROA
ADVANCING CANCER CARE FOR 12-24 YEAR OLDS

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 get much sun. Melanoma more commonly affects older adults but can affect AYAs too. When melanoma is found at an early stage, it can usually be successfully treated with surgery.

If you've recently been diagnosed with early stage melanoma, you've hopefully 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. It's important to know you're not alone. Lots of young people feel this way, and there are people here to support you.

The AYA Cancer Network Aotearoa has put together this guide to explain what might happen next, what to be aware of, and where to find information and support.

How is early stage melanoma treated?

Most early-stage melanomas are successfully 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. It might have been followed by a wider excision to remove a small amount of surrounding skin, depending on your results.

Ask your healthcare team if your melanoma has been discussed at a melanoma MDM (multi-disciplinary meeting), where a team of specialists review and plan your care. Anyone under 25 with melanoma should have their case discussed at one.

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.

Most people recover well from this surgery and can return to their usual activities after a short period of healing.

What comes next?

After your melanoma has been removed, you'll have follow-up appointments to make sure your scar is healing well and to check for any signs of new melanomas. Follow-up appointments usually include skin checks and checking the area where your melanoma was removed. Depending on your melanoma, you may also have imaging, such as an ultrasound, or other tests. These can sometimes feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first, but your healthcare team will explain what to expect. You may also need to wait for results from time to time and it's normal to feel anxious or uncertain while you're waiting.

How often you have follow-up appointments, and for how long, will depend on your melanoma, your test results and your individual risk factors. It's likely that these check-ups will become less frequent over time.

Tip

It's always okay to ask your healthcare team questions if they use any medical terms or explanations that you are unsure of.

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 and appointments and where will these take place?
- How often will I need to have follow-up appointments and what will they include?
- 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?
- Could my scar affect my daily life, sport, or work, and what support or strategies are available to help me manage this?
- How do I check my skin and what do I need to look for?
- Who can I contact if I'm worried or have more questions?

You can 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.

Other questions for my healthcare team

Helpful charitable organisations

Canteen Aotearoa: Offers a range of online and face-to-face support services for young people aged 12–24 who are affected by cancer. They provide free individual support sessions and therapy, and organise regular peer support events. Visit **www.canteen.org.nz** or phone **0800 2268 336.**

Cancer Society: Provides a range of emotional wellbeing resources to those aged over 18. Resources include free counselling sessions, webinars and online talks, and online support groups. Visit **www.cancer.org.nz** or phone **0800 226 237**. They also run the **sunsmart.org.nz** website.

Melanoma New Zealand: Focuses on melanoma prevention, detection and patient care. This includes free phone or online consultations with a melanoma nurse educator. For helpful resources and links, visit **www.melanoma.org.nz** or phone **0800 4 MELANOMA** (0800 463 526)

Cancer Support NZ: Provides free, practical support for people affected by cancer, including online and community programmes. Their Look Good Feel Better programme offers free classes on skin and appearance changes. Visit **cancersupport.org.nz** or phone **0800 865 432.**

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How can I look after my health after melanoma?

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 bit worrying to think about, but you can take back control by doing the following three things:

1. Self-check your skin regularly

You are often the first to notice changes in your skin, so it is important to check your skin regularly. Keep an eye on any changes in size, shape or colour of existing moles or freckles, or the development of any new ones. Check your whole body, including areas that don't usually get much sun.

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** and **melanoma.org.nz** for visual guides and videos and if you notice any changes in your skin or general health, contact your GP or healthcare team.

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 water-resistant 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 to attend your follow-up appointments. In between appointments, and once your scheduled follow-up ends, your GP will usually be your main point of contact for any concerns.

Tip

If a time doesn't suit because of school, work, or other commitments, let your healthcare team know — they may be able to offer an alternative.

How can I adapt to changes to my appearance?

Depending on their size and where they are on your body, 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 area around it might look and feel different (for example, a different colour or texture, and sometimes more sensitive). The area will usually change as it heals, and differences in colour or texture may become less noticeable over time.

It is common to find it difficult to adjust if you have had a change in your 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.

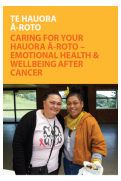
Who can I talk to?

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. These feelings may become easier to manage over time. 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. Sharing how you're feeling can help them understand how to support you. 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 on managing any fears and worries you may have as you navigate life after cancer treatment. You can find this (and many other resources) at **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** and the comprehensive guide produced by Melanoma New Zealand; 'Understanding Early Melanoma' available at **www.melanoma.org.nz**





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