What is melanoma?

Melanoma is a skin cancer that begins in melanocytes, cells that give color to skin and other tissues. Most often, melanoma begins in a mole on the skin, but it can also develop in other areas such as the eye.

Doctors rate a cancer’s severity by stages after making a diagnosis. Staging helps the doctor plan the best treatment for you. Stages for melanoma run from stage 0 to stage IV. The higher the stage of the cancer, the more severe the disease.

Your doctor will measure how deep the melanoma goes into your skin. This is measured in millimeters (mm). 1 millimeter is about the size of a sharpened pencil point. A new crayon point is about 2 mm. The eraser of a new pencil is about 5 mm.

What are stages 0-I?

Stages 0-I mean the cancer is less than 2 mm thick and hasn’t spread to the lymph nodes or other areas of the body.

**Stage 0 (in situ)**
- “In situ” means in the original position or place.
- The melanoma is only in the top of the outer layer of the skin (called the epidermis).

*Treatment: Surgery*

**Stage 1a**
- The melanoma is no more than 1 mm thick.

*Treatment: Surgery*

**Stage 1b**
- The melanoma is no more than 1 mm thick and has a break in the skin (called an ulceration) OR is more than 1 mm but no more than 2 mm thick and has no ulceration.

*Treatment: Surgery; may include a sentinel lymph node biopsy*
What are the treatments for stages 0-I melanoma?

Because the cancer probably has not spread beyond the skin, surgery is the best treatment. There are three surgeries that may be used to treat these stages of melanoma: local excision, staged excision, and sentinel lymph node biopsy.

**Local excision** – During this surgery, your doctor will remove the tumor and a rim of the healthy skin around it. It is done in clinic under local anesthesia. He or she will look at the healthy skin to make sure the cancer has not started to spread.

**Staged excision** – The goal of a staged excision is to remove the cancer and keep as much healthy tissue possible. It is done in clinic under local anesthesia. Your doctor will send the removed tissue to a lab, where it will be checked under a microscope to make sure all the cancer has been removed. This can take one to two hours. While the tissue is examined, you will be bandaged up and asked to wait. If all the cancer was removed, your doctor will repair your wound. If there is more cancer, your doctor will take more tissue and send it to the lab. This procedure will be repeated until all the cancer is gone.

**Sentinel lymph node biopsy** – A sample (biopsy) is taken from the sentinel lymph node to check for cancer cells. A sentinel lymph node is the first lymph node to which cancer cells are likely to spread from the original tumor.

Your doctor may do a test to find a sentinel lymph node. This test is called a lymphoscintigraphy.

What can I expect after treatment?

**Regular visits to your doctor** – Melanoma patients are at high risk of the cancer coming back. Patients should follow up with their doctor every three months for the first year after surgery and every six months for two to five years after. After that, your doctor may recommend a follow-up exam every year.

**Skin self-exams** – Examine your skin once a month to get familiar with your own pattern of moles and freckles.

1. Look at your body from all sides in front of a mirror. Bend your elbows and check your forearms, upper arms, and palms carefully.
2. Next, look at the backs of your legs and feet, including the soles and spaces between the toes.
3. Examine the back of your neck and scalp with a hand mirror, parting and lifting the hair. Also, check your back, buttocks, and genital area.

Look for any of the following:

- A new mole
- A change in the size, shape, texture, or color of a mole
- A sore that does not heal

If you see anything abnormal, visit your dermatologist as soon as possible.

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**Helpful Resources**

**The Tom C. Mathews Jr. Familial Melanoma Research Clinic at HCI**
801-585-0595 or 1-866-378-4840 toll free
Our researchers study melanoma patterns in families to discover better ways to detect and treat the disease.

**The G. Mitchell Morris Cancer Learning Center**
6th floor of HCI’s cancer hospital
801-581-6365 or 1-888-424-2100 toll free
This is a free cancer resource library. Cancer information specialists can answer your questions and locate helpful information.

**Facial Prosthetics Services**
801-585-0140
Facial Prosthetics Services creates ears, eyes, noses, and other parts of the face for people affected by cancer.

**Patient and Family Support Services**
801-585-9755
Patient and Family Support staff help patients and their loved ones find counseling and other resources that can reduce the distress associated with cancer.