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Cancer alarms as pathologists fear thousands of Australians may have missed skin checks

NATIONAL: Pathologists are urging Australians to catch up on missed skin checks as data shows that people may have delayed health appointments during lockdowns, leading to potential delayed diagnoses of skin conditions, including cancer.

Australians are advised to perform regular self-checks of their skin, and to consult a health professional about any spot or lesion of concern.

When conducting a skin check, if a health professional identifies any lesions of concern, they may refer the patient to a dermatologist or may remove all or part of the lesion for pathology testing.

A diagnosis of cancer can only be confirmed or ruled out by pathology testing.

Victoria Beedle is CEO of Melanoma Patients Australia she said:

“Australians might feel their skin cancer risk is lower if they’ve spent less time outdoors during periods of lockdown. However, it is important to remember that skin cancers often develop over months and years. Risk increases with age as well as a history of sunburn, so it’s not only your current sun exposure which is of concern. Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer and most common cancer in young Australians. It is responsible for the majority of deaths from skin cancer, but it is very treatable if caught early.”

Medicare data shows the number of skin lesions removed for Australian patients during the COVID-19 pandemic dropped significantly in most states, meaning many Australians could be at risk of delayed cancer diagnosis and treatment.

When comparing Medicare data for January to September 2020 and 2021 against the same period in 2019, removal of skin lesions for both suspected and confirmed cancers was down in all states and territories except the ACT and Tasmania.

The worst hit place was the Northern Territory with removal of lesions down 7 per cent in 2020, and 17 per cent in 2021. New South Wales had 7 per cent fewer lesions excised in 2020 and 6 per cent fewer in 2021.

Excisions in the most locked down state, Victoria, were down 10 per cent in 2020, but started to catch up in 2021, being 1 per cent over 2019 numbers.

South Australia also had fewer lesions removed; 8 per cent fewer in 2020 and 3 per cent fewer in 2021.

Dr Angus Collins, a Dermatopathologist at Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology in Brisbane, Queensland said:

‘Early diagnosis of skin cancers is the most effective way to ensuring a good outcome. Delayed diagnosis could see patients requiring more invasive treatment or having serious complications including spread of the disease.’

Nationally, during January to September 2021, more than 30,000 fewer skin lesions were removed, and in the same period of 2020, over 59,000 fewer.

As many skin checks will not result in removal of a lesion, this data points towards significantly fewer skin checks being conducted overall.

Dr Nick Musgrave, a Histopathologist at Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology in Brisbane, Queensland said:

“The data is unequivocal. It’s a real concern that there have been fewer skin samples referred for pathology testing as a result of the pandemic. It’s a mistake to think of skin cancers as being fairly innocuous. I encourage everyone to pay attention to their skin and have a thorough skin check performed on a regular basis. At the very least, talk to your doctor about any new or changing spots or lesions. Your doctor can decide if pathology testing is required, and the pathologist can assess the skin tissue to detect any cancer that may be present. Please don’t delay getting an appointment with your GP as early detection is important for the best treatment outcomes for all types of skin conditions, including skin cancers. This is particularly true for malignant melanoma which can metastasize at a very early stage.”

Skin cancers account for around 80% of all newly diagnosed cancers in Australia each year.

The incidence of skin cancer is one of the highest in the world, two to three times the rates in Canada, the US and the UK¹.

Melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer. Early detection before the disease spreads is critical.

Australia has been reported to have the highest incidence of non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) in the world.³ NMSC is more common than Melanoma and includes basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC).

If left untreated, BCC can damage the skin and tissue causing disfigurement, and may require radiation treatment.

If undetected, SCC skin lesions can grow and cause disfigurement, or spread to other parts of the body. It can be more dangerous if found on the face, ears or neck, and in some cases it is life-threatening. Most cases are curable and early diagnosis helps to minimise the risk of complications.

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Interviewees:

Dr Angus Collins, Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology, Brisbane.

References

1. <https://www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/types-of-cancer/skin-cancer>
2. <https://melanomapatients.org.au/about-melanoma/melanoma-facts/>
3. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25716064/>

About Pathology Awareness Australia (PAA)

Pathology Awareness Australia is a not-for-profit company formed to improve understanding and recognition of Australia’s world class pathology services.

MEDIA RELEASE



The company represents 95% of the Australian pathology sector with members including the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, private pathology groups, public pathology groups, manufacturers and suppliers to industry, and professional groups. Pathology Awareness Australia runs the Know Pathology Know Healthcare initiative to educate Australians on the role of pathology in healthcare <http://knowpathology.com.au/>