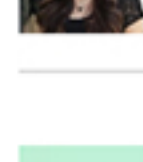


What the Heck Is Mole Mapping?

JUNE 26, 2019 – 2:09 PM – 0 COMMENTS



By **NICOLE PAJER** @NicolePajer



(iStock)

One in five Americans will develop skin cancer **by the age of 70**. But the good news is that if caught and treated early, you're very likely to survive a diagnosis. The five-year survival rate for patients who develop **melanoma** and have it detected early, for instance, is 98 percent.

In order to check for potentially cancerous moles, dermatologists recommend that patients get an annual mole check performed. This can help your doctor to keep an eye on any irregularly shaped or suspicious moles and to make sure that you are clear of skin cancer.

Related: 3 Skin Cancer Apps Doctors Recommend—And How Not to Use Them

But if you are at a higher risk of developing melanoma or want a more thorough examination, you may want to consider trying out a relatively **newer technology** known as mole mapping.

What is mole mapping?

In general, patients with many moles on their body might find it difficult to keep track of all of their lesions.

"They can't tell if a mole is changing or if it's a new growth, which might prompt further testing like a biopsy by a board-certified dermatologist," explains **Hal Weitzbuch, MD**, a dermatologist in Calabasas, California.

According to the expert, this is where mole mapping can come into the picture. "Mole mapping is a technique these patients can utilize to increase their ability to find a concerning lesion sooner," he explains.

The process entails full body photography, in a number of positions, to document the entire body surface area. Once a session is completed, a record of a patient's moles are filed in the system, which shows a series of photos of the different areas of the skin and highlights any moles that currently appear. This creates a baseline set of images of a person's current inventory of moles. This process can be repeated on an annual basis or as needed per your dermatologist, and with each new photo session, your doctor will compare the images and will be able to see any changes to existing moles or growth of new ones.



HEALTHY NOW TIP

Think sun protection no matter what the season. Ultraviolet radiation from the sun, the No. 1 cause of skin cancer, is a year-round concern, so be sure you're protected with SPF.

From Our Partners at the Cleveland Clinic

What to expect during a session

During a typical session, a patient will be asked to remove their clothing to provide visibility to all areas of their skin. A camera on an automated track will then move up and down taking images of the front, back and sides of the patient. In some instances, a standalone photographer manning a camera may also perform the procedure, shifting positions and snapping photos to capture images of all of the different surface areas of your skin.

There are a variety of poses that the person operating the machine will ask you to put yourself into so that they can catch a glimpse of all of the areas of your skin where moles may appear. This includes turning to face the camera, turning away from it, putting your arms up to give the cameras a glimpse at your underarms and rotating your legs to reveal your inner and outer thighs.

"It is best not to wear makeup, jewelry or nail polish when undergoing a skin exam or mole mapping," says CareMount Medical dermatologist, **Brent D. Wainwright, MD**.

Debra Jaliman, MD, board-certified NYC dermatologist, assistant professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and author of the book, *Skin Rules: Trade Secrets from a Top New York Dermatologist* notes that, "You may feel a little embarrassed but the good news is that it is painless." It's important to remember that your doctor is taking these photos of you for your own medical use and that the images will be securely stored within their systems.

Related: Can Sunscreen Give You Cancer?

Wainwright notes that while mole mapping/photographic skin surveillance can improve detection of early melanoma, one should be aware that melanoma may be hidden in a location that has not been imaged and that early melanoma and other skin cancers may look benign. "As such, it does not eliminate the need for routine self-exam of skin at home or skin checks with your dermatologist," he says.

Who should consider mole mapping?

According Sandy Skotnicki, MD, founder of Toronto's Bay Dermatology Centre, and author of *Beyond Soap*, people more prone to developing melanoma should consider mole mapping. High risk factors include:

- A family history of melanoma
- Having red hair and freckles
- A history of blistering sunburns
- 50 or more moles or more than 10 moles on each arm
- The presence of dysplastic or atypical moles
- Having a history of previous melanoma

Where can you get this done?

Mole mapping is frequently available at university medical centers with an affiliated dermatology training program, says Wainwright. "Additionally, more private practices are offering this service, as do a few third party providers such as **MoleSafe**," he adds. It is best to check with your dermatologist for appropriate referral.

Is this covered by insurance?

It depends. "If a physician sees mole mapping as medically necessary and deems the patient as high-risk for skin cancer, the insurance company usually will pay," says Jaliman. She cautions, however, that if the procedure is requested for cosmetic reasons and the patient doesn't fall in high risk category, then insurance might not cover it.

In his practice, Wainwright typically sees patients having to pay initially out of pocket and then going on to attempt to seek reimbursement from their insurance providers. "I am hopeful that moving forward this will become a procedure with more available coverage," he says.

DIY mole mapping

"Before the fancy machines, we would send patients to a professional medical photographer at one of our hospitals. Thus, if you can't afford to get the newer mole mapping done, you can do it yourself with the help of a partner," says Skotnicki. She suggests using a newer smart phone that takes high quality photos or a digital camera. Take off your clothes and have someone snap pictures of your entire body. "Do it in sections: upper chest, lower chest, upper and lower arms inside and out, etc." She also suggests keeping your photos in a file on your phone or iPad under lock and key and repeating the photo session on an annual basis. This will allow you to compare your images year over year to see if you are developing any new moles or if any moles are changing in shape or size.

And remember, it's not just your moles that need to be photographed. Skotnicki points out that 80 percent of melanomas do not come from moles but from new lesions developing anywhere: "Even where the sun does not shine." Thus, she recommends photographing your whole body.

You can also take any photos of changing moles in with you for your annual skincare check at your dermatologist's office. Wainwright recommends that patients check out the American Academy of Dermatology **body mole map**, which provides information on how to check your skin for signs of skin cancer as well as how to keep track of the spots on your skin.