Moles that change color or increase in number: Cause for concern? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

Over the span of the last couple of years, I have noticed a significant number of moles appearing on my body. They have been appearing everywhere from my neck to my inner thighs. I had one on my neck since childhood, but now have so many more. Is this normal? Is it something I should be concerned with? And does child bearing have any relevance to this happening?

(2) Dear Alice,

I have a mole which has turned very dark purple, and grown a bit in size (still small). This is the second time it has done this ? last time was a couple of weeks ago, and it slowly faded back to almost nothing until today. Should I be very concerned about this?

Answer

Dear Readers,

The sudden change in appearance of a mole (a dermatologist may call it a nevus or nevi, if there are more than one) or a recent uptick in their quantity can certainly provoke anxiety. Luckily, most types of moles are harmless. While some change in the appearance and number may occur over time, if and when the moles in question exhibit signs of concern that?s the time to seek medical attention (read on for more specifics).

The majority of moles and other unclassifiable blemishes are benign, or non-cancerous. However, certain characteristics of each may denote a higher risk for melanoma (a type of skin cancer). Moles that you?re born with are called congenital moles. These do not typically impart skin cancer risk, unless the mole you?re born with is quite large. Another type of mole is known as an acquired mole. These appear after a person is born and adults tend to have anywhere from 10 to 40 of these moles on their bodies. They?re generally considered to be no-risk, unless a person has more than 50 acquired moles. And, Reader #1, you?re right about pregnancy and the potential for increasing the number of moles on the body. Interestingly, they may multiply during puberty as well ? the surge in numbers during these life stages is associated with hormonal changes in the body.

While some types of moles are easy to recognize as harmless, others are not. Atypical moles
are a type that also appear after a person is born, but are larger than average size, may not be round, and be more than one color. While these often have suspicious characteristics, they are not typically cancerous. Similarly, some folks develop what are called spitz nevus, or moles that are often pink, dome-shaped, and may bleed. These are difficult to distinguish from moles that may be malignant but often they are benign as well.

Spots or moles that warrant a second look by a medical professional include any that appear to have changing characteristics, such as changing colors, bleeding, or itching. They may also become painful over time. To determine whether any of the moles you’ve described warrant further attention, it’s a good idea to follow the "ABCDEs." More specifically, here are five characteristics of moles to watch out for:

- **Asymmetry:** If one half of the moles is unlike the other half in shape or color.
- **Border:** If the mole has an irregular, scalloped, or poorly defined border on its edges.
- **Color:** If the mole varies in color from one area to another, or has shades of tan, brown, and black, or even white, red, or blue. Most moles are brown and uniformly a darker shade than your natural skin tone.
- **Diameter:** If the diameter is greater than a quarter of an inch or about six millimeters. The larger the mole (especially if it’s growing fast), the greater the cause for concern.
- **Evolving:** If a mole or skin lesion looks different from the others on your body, or is changing in size, shape, height, or color (especially if it turns black).

Checking on your moles regularly is the best way to make sure they won’t cause a problem later on. If there’s a change that you’ve recently observed in any of your moles — such as the one you’ve observed, Reader #2 — your best bet is to make an appointment with your health care provider or a dermatologist. It’s been noted that cancerous moles may exhibit a range of these characteristics — some may involve just a few of them, others may have them all. So, when in doubt, get it checked out! In addition to keeping a close eye on your moles, exposure to the sun can also affect the intensity of freckles and the appearance of moles. The proper use of sunscreen and other sun-protection methods are helpful prevention tools for everyone as well. For more information about new moles and moles in general, the American Academy of Dermatology is a great resource.

Hope this helps you both 'mole' over the information about these skin changes!

Alice!

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