MRF Says Go Beyond “Usual Suspects” to Watch Moles
-Vigilant Monthly Skin Checks Can Give Critical Advantage Over Cancer-

WASHINGTON—Unless you are Cindy Crawford, you might give little thought to the moles, freckles and other marks dotting your skin. But, as an estimated 68,000 people discovered last year, these spots can evolve into melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

Your primary care doctor and your dermatologist play a critical role in carefully examining your moles on an annual basis, watching for any changes or characteristics that might indicate they are dangerous. These checks, especially those conducted by experienced dermatologists, are lifesaving because when melanoma is caught in its early stages, survival rates for patients can exceed 90 percent. However, when melanoma is diagnosed in the later stages, survival is, on average, only about a year.

But beyond the “usual suspects” of the dermatologist and primary care doctor, it’s important to recognize the role you and other people can play in staying vigilant against melanoma. “Quite simply, the hardest part of monitoring your moles is that there are parts of your body that are hard to see,” said Tim Turnham, executive director of the Melanoma Research Foundation (MRF).

While they are no substitute for the expert eyes of a physician who deals primarily with skin issues, here’s a list of people who can help watch for changes in your moles and prompt a visit to the dermatologist:

You (With a Mirror): After dermatologists, most melanomas are caught by patients themselves. That’s because nobody knows your body better than you. Many survivors report being tipped off not only by a change in a mole, but also having a gut feeling that something was wrong. So, don’t underestimate your role in catching cancer early. With the help of good mirrors, you can be your own best ally in the fight.

Spouse/Partners: The fact is that spouses and partners see more of our bodies, on a more regular basis, than just about anyone else. That special relationship provides not only an extra set of eyes, but also someone who is invested in your well-being.

Dentists, Eye Doctors and Women’s Health Professionals: Some melanomas can emerge in and on surprising parts of the body, including inside the mouth or on genitals (mucosal melanoma), and inside the eye (ocular melanoma). Office visits with dentists, ophthalmologists,
optometrists, OB/GYNs and midwives give you an opportunity to ask whether they see anything unusual that requires further examination.

Health and Beauty Professionals: The next time your hairstylist is blow drying your hair, a nail specialist is giving you a pedicure or a massage therapist is working out your knots, ask whether they see any moles on your body. This will help you make “mental map” of the moles that you might not be able to see. Most professionals will be sensitive about intruding on their clients’ personal issues, so let them know that it’s OK for them to ask you about your moles, especially if they see something concerning.

When any changes in a mole’s shape, color or size are detected, it should be checked by a dermatologist right away. It is particularly important to check any moles than are asymmetrical, have irregular borders, have especially dark or inconsistent coloring, or are bigger than a pencil eraser.

Early detection is particularly important for people who have risk factors for melanoma. Risk factors include having one of these characteristics:

- Fair skin, light hair or light eyes
- More than 50 moles
- A personal or family history of melanoma
- A weakened immune system

Usually it is harmless when a skin spot changes color or grows in size, but there is no way to tell without having it checked by a dermatologist, according to Turnham. “Each individual is likely to have the best knowledge of their own skin,” he said. “Being aware of what is normal for you could save your life.”

###

About Melanoma
Melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, is one of the fastest growing cancers in the United States and can strike men and women of all ages, all races and skin types. In fact, with a one in 50 lifetime risk of developing melanoma, more than 68,000 Americans were expected to be diagnosed with the disease in 2010, resulting in 8,700 deaths or one person every hour. Melanoma is the most common form of cancer for young adults 25- to 29-years-old and the second most common cancer in adolescents and young adults 15- to 29-years-old.

About Melanoma Research Foundation
The Melanoma Research Foundation (MRF) is the largest independent, national organization devoted to melanoma in the United States. Committed to the support of medical research in finding effective treatments and eventually a cure for melanoma, the MRF also educates patients and physicians about prevention, diagnosis and the treatment of melanoma. The MRF is an active advocate for the melanoma community, helping to raise awareness of this disease and the need for a cure. The MRF’s website is the premier source for melanoma information seekers. More information is available at [www.melanoma.org](http://www.melanoma.org).