New tool to help melanoma's most at-risk group detect cancer early

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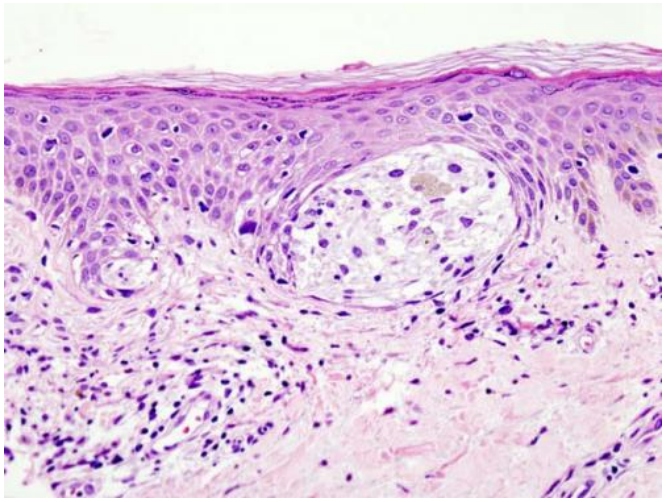

Melanoma in skin biopsy with H&E stain — this case may represent superficial spreading melanoma. Credit: Wikipedia/CC BY-SA 3.0

People who examine their own skin for melanoma may increase their chances to find cancers when they are less deep and more treatable than those people whose melanoma is found incidentally.

Building on this finding, QUT sun safety researchers have developed a simple tool to assess Queensland men over 50, the group most likely to be diagnosed with and die from melanoma, on their attitude to skin self-examination (SSE).

The study was conducted in collaboration with Cancer Council Queensland and funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Professor Monika Janda, from the NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence in Sun and Health at QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, has studied ways to encourage this most at-risk group to be aware of the importance of regular skins checks, for the past eight years.

"While melanoma incidence and mortality is highest in men 50 or over, this group is less likely to detect their own melanomas and also less likely to undergo whole-body, clinical, skin examinations compared to other population groups," Professor Janda said.

"We need a quick, reliable assessment tool for GPs and other healthcare workers to use to find out which men might need extra encouragement or intervention to ensure early melanoma detection.

"Our previous research had found that awareness of and positive attitudes towards SSE were strongly associated with men intending to examine their skin for any changes or unusual spots.

"For this research we tested the Skin Self-Examination Attitude Scale (SSEAS) a Cancer Council Queensland and QUT-developed, eight-point, skin self-examination attitude scale.

"We tested the scale on more than 800 Queensland men in the at-risk group to see how effective it was in assessing their attitude for conducting regular, thorough skin self-examinations.

"We found just 18 per cent strongly they could examine their skin regularly, even if they had no one to help them and fewer than 50 per cent strongly agreed they would see a doctor immediately after finding a suspicious lesion on their skin."

Dr Janda said the study found the scale was quick, simple to use, and a reliable way for health professionals to identify people who may need encouragement and reminders to look for any abnormal signs on a regular basis.

Cancer Council Queensland spokesperson Katie Clift said the study was one of the first of its kind to assess attitudes to adopting skin self-examination.

"Few studies have measured the factors that may contribute to whether people check their skin to detect melanoma early, or not," Ms Clift said.

"We are delighted GPS and health professionals now have an easy way to identify their patients who need extra encouragement to monitor their own skin for changes.

"We urge all Queenslanders to protect their skin to reduce their sun cancer risk and to check regularly for changes because there is a much greater chance of survival if the cancer is found early."

More information: Anyone interested in participating in a current sun exposure and sun protection survey at QUT, please visit sunaus.org

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