

Benign Moles

What are benign moles?

These are non-cancerous growths of cells in the skin called melanocytes. These melanocytes are responsible for the normal skin colouration and produce the pigment that gives people a suntan. Moles can be skin coloured or brown depending on the amount of pigment produced by the melanocytes in the skin lesion. They may also be flat or raised.

Who develops moles?

Everyone develops moles at some time in their life. The average young adult in the UK has between 10-20 small brown flat or slightly raised marks on his/her skin. They are totally painless and most people are not aware of them. Most moles will appear between the ages of 4 and 40 years. It is rare to develop new mole after the age of 45 years. In older age they may completely disappear. We do not know why some people develop more moles than others. However, it is well known that many inherit moles from their parents, particularly raised moles.

What do they look like?

When they first appear, moles are flat brown circles or ovals on the skin surface. They can usually be covered by the blunt end of a pencil, and are present throughout the year, unlike freckles, which fade during the winter. When they become more established they may become raised from the skin and occasionally develop hair growth. They may be skin coloured (intradermal naevi) or raised from the skin and contain hair (compoundnaevi).

Do they need treatment?

No, benign moles are usually totally harmless. Surgical removal is only necessary if the mole is showing signs of change such as increasing size, shape or colour. Occasionally, moles may become inflamed or irritated but only need to be removed if it is necessary to exclude a skin cancer. Under such circumstances, the mole will be sent to a consultant pathologist for examination under a microscope. This test may take 2-weeks to complete and a report will be sent to your GP.

What treatment is available?

Benign intradermal naevi are usually treated by shaving them off flush to the skin (shave excision). Raised moles or brown moles may need surgical removal with stitches (excision). A local anaesthetic injection will be required for all of these procedures. Any surgery may be complicated by scar formation (depressed or raised from the skin), infection, bleeding or wound rupture. Typically shave excision produces the best cosmetic results but can only be used for skin-coloured moles.

What cosmetic treatments are available on the NHS?

Due to the limitation on resources and increase in skin cancer referrals, we cannot routinely offer cosmetic mole removal in NHS dermatology clinics. In some circumstances your GP may agree to remove your moles but they may not be keen to do this if they occur on the face. The other alternative is to pay for mole removal privately. Private treatment typically costs £250-£300.