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Atypical Nevus

An **atypical nevus** (also called a dysplastic nevus) is a benign growth that may share some of the clinical or microscopic features of melanoma, but it is not a melanoma or any other form of cancer. However, the presence of atypical nevi may increase the risk of developing a melanoma, or be a marker for someone who is at risk of developing melanoma. This increased risk varies from very small for those with a single atypical nevus to higher for those with many.

What does an atypical nevus look like?

By definition, atypical nevi can have a variable appearance. They have ABC features. They are often **a**symmetrical (one portion larger than the other), tend to have an irregular **b**order, and are normally variably **c**olored (typically with shades of tan, brown, black, and red). An atypical nevus will have characteristic microscopic features found on a skin biopsy. The claim to fame of the atypical nevus is that it often can look like a melanoma. Because of this your biopsy may be stained with special markers to help differentiate between atypical nevus and a true melanoma.

Atypical nevi can occur anywhere on the body, and usually begin to appear at puberty. They may however, be more common in sun-exposed areas, the back, and the legs.

The lifetime risk of a person in the U.S. developing melanoma is 1 in 75. A patient with one to four atypical nevi without a personal or family history of melanoma is at a slightly higher risk than the general population. However, an atypical nevus is not the same as melanoma and does not need to be treated aggressively, but should be observed for changes, biopsied, or conservatively excised.

People with a number of atypical nevi (moles) are at a higher risk for developing melanoma. We advise any patient with biopsy proven atypical moles and/or family history of melanoma to receive yearly exams and learn to perform monthly self skin checks at home.

These measures also apply to the general population as melanoma can occur in persons of all skin types. While squamous cell carcinoma and basal cell carcinoma usually occur in areas of repeated sun exposure, melanoma can occur anywhere, even in covered areas.