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blackbook

# Beauty



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**W**hat's in a mole? A mole can be a beauty mark — think of Marilyn Monroe or Cindy Crawford with their beauty marks near their luscious lips. It was the original 50s sex symbol's beauty mark that paved the way for future celebrities who started drawing the dark spot with kohl pencils. Modern beauty-spot bearers with the real thing include actress Scarlett Johansson and burlesque dancer Dita Von Teese, both sex symbols with beauty moles on their cheeks.

But beyond the merely superficial, your mole can give you more clues about your skin health than you think. Our skin is the largest breathing organ on your body, and it changes over time. If you're a sun worshipper, take note: skin cancer is most commonly caused by the sun's ultraviolet rays, which damages skin cells and leads to abnormal cell growth. You are more at risk if you're fair-skinned and have minimal melanin (pigmentation) in your skin, since you're more likely to start freckling and over time, darker freckles and moles may form on skin that's constantly exposed to the sun's rays.

A mole is a cluster of pigment cells that creates a flat or raised dark brown spot on your skin. Moles are common and appear on everyone. You may have a mole at birth as it can also be genetically pre-determined, or it may appear later in life. Don't brush off any mole that starts looking unusual over time. If you do see a mole that starts to look different, it's time to take a closer look in the mirror; and if it's difficult for you to catch a glimpse of the mole in an awkward spot, get a loved one to help you inspect it.

Whether it's on your face or other parts of your body, a changing mole raises red flags; especially if you're past the age of 20, you should start planning a trip to the dermatologist. According to statistics from the National Cancer Centre, skin cancer is the top eighth cancer affecting 800 women in Singapore each year.

### The mole letter test

Dr Patricia Yuen, consultant dermatologist at Pacific Healthcare Specialist Centre and aesthetic physician Dr Patrina Wong of Linc Aesthetic both suggest an easy A-B-C-D formula for mole inspection. Firstly, look out for asymmetry of the mole. This is followed by border irregularity of the mole — when the edges are ragged, notched or blurred; colour — when different shades of red or black give rise to mottled appearance; and lastly, diameter.

"Moles can be found in all sizes, and moles larger than 6mm are likely to be melanoma (cancerous)," says Dr Wong. If you notice a mole that looks different from the others, or if it changes, itches or bleeds even if it is smaller than 6mm wide, it's time to see a dermatologist who will check for any abnormalities in the mole. Before you start panicking, not all moles are created equally

dangerous. Moles are considered as lesions on the skin, and are known as nevus. Like Phua Chu Kang's large hairy mole, moles with a single or various strands of hair are quite uncommon.

### Spot check

Can one stop mole growth? Unfortunately, you can't prevent mole formation since most of them are genetically pre-determined, says consultant dermatologist Dr Cheong Wai Kwong of Specialist Skin Clinic. He points out that moles may sometimes occur during pregnancy, as changing hormonal levels may cause pigmentation. If you're pregnant, stay aware of the changes in your skin, and keep to the A-B-C-D (asymmetry, border, colour and diameter) mole inspection formula if you suspect that a mole's gone awry.

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Otherwise, always practice adequate protection, especially if you spend long periods of time in the sun. Use an umbrella when you can, stay in the shade, and remember to use sun block on skin that's constantly exposed to UV rays. Tanned skin may give you a sporty healthy glow, but instead

## The five most common types of moles seen by doctors



- 1 JUNCTIONAL NEVUS** Flat, dark brown or black, usually smaller than 5mm.
- 2 COMPOUND NEVUS** More commonly known as the beauty mark, it is slightly raised, dark brown or black and usually smaller than 5mm.
- 3 INTRADERMAL NEVUS** Raised and unpigmented, these are usually flesh-coloured roundish lumps on your skin and may appear larger than 5mm.
- 4 BLUE NEVUS** It appears as a blueish hue as pigment cells are scattered in deep layers of the skin.
- 5 DYSPLASTIC NEVUS** It tends to be larger than 6mm in diameter, and have irregular borders and discolouration. These moles may transform into melanoma over time, and are the ones that you should take note of. They are best removed before they turn cancerous.

of baking yourself on a pool deck chair, try using bronzers or self-tanning liquids to achieve a similar sun-kissed look, minus the sun damage.

## Removing the dotted line

Removing moles is one of the most commonly requested treatments in most skin clinics. Dr Cheong categorises most mole-removing patients in any of these two groups: those who want to remove it for health reasons, or those who wish to remove the mole for aesthetic purposes.

Melanoma is not restricted to age or gender, and following a consultation, the doctor assess whether the mole actually needs to be removed. But here in Asia, where the benchmark for beauty is often porcelain fair and unblemished skin, a mole may not be a mark of beauty at all. Most of the patients who seek mole removal for such aesthetic purposes are females executives in their 20s and 30s, although Dr Cheong says that he is now seeing more male patients requesting for mole removal as well.

There are also patients who request to remove a mole based on Chinese *feng shui* beliefs that a mole in a particular position will bring them bad luck, as Dr Cheong explains: "I have removed moles for patients as they think that a mole on their palm might leak their wealth!" But for whatever reason the patient may have, Dr Cheong states that it is advisable for the patient to go for a consultation and discuss the type of removal method to be used, and the patient should be given time to go home and think about the procedure before making an appointment for mole removal.

Think twice about the beautician who offers you mole removal for \$5 a pop — it might not be as good a deal as you think. The untrained beautician often uses a rough electrocautery laser which scrapes off the topmost layer of skin but often doesn't remove most of the dark pigment cells. It may also lead to scarring and infection, or even worse, a raised keloid scar for people prone to keloid scarring, which may leave you with a pinkish, upraised scar, definitely much uglier than a mole.

Beauty products with spot lightening functions or topical applications may lighten pigmentation, but will not get rid of a mole entirely. More importantly, Dr Cheong points out that a beautician may not be able to spot the changes in your mole and whether it has turned cancerous or not.

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Doctors recommend two proper mole removal methods: using a laser like a CO2 or Q-switch NdYA Glaser, or through surgical excision with a scalpel. The laser is more effective for small, flat moles less than 5mm wide and burns off the topmost layer of the skin. It costs \$75 to \$300 per mole for laser removal and takes 10 to 20 minutes on average, and the patient can go back to work immediately although there will be a tiny plaster. After the laser mole removal, there will be a small pink scar and a scab will form. But once the scab falls off, the scar fades and eventually blends in with the rest of your skin colour.

For larger moles, doctors often remove it by cutting away the affected area, and then stitching the wound up. Mole removal by excision usually takes a longer process than laser removal as there's usually a larger skin surface involved. Surgical removals, especially for moles on the face, also tend to be more expensive as extra care has to be taken, says Dr Cheong. This method usually costs \$300 per mole on average. There are usually two to six stitches per mole depending on its size, and the doctor will apply a dressing after a surgery. The stitches can be removed in five to 14 days, and there will be a scar which can be concealed with makeup, but this will gradually get fainter over time. **B**