Wellness and Healthy Living

Have You Gotten That Mole Checked?

Maybe you’ve had this experience: You look in the mirror and notice a mole you haven’t seen before. Or you notice that one of your usual moles looks different. You start to worry. Could it be cancer? Should you get it checked out?

Moles can become cancerous, so it’s important to have your doctor look at them. Learn how to check your skin for moles and recognize the signs of a potential problem.

Moles are small skin growths made up of pigmented cells. In general, a normal mole is brown, tan, or flesh-colored and has well-defined edges. It is usually round or oval, and smaller than a pencil eraser. It may be flat or dome-shaped.

About 10 percent of people have a “normal” mole that doesn’t look normal. It may be larger than average, have an odd shape, or be more than one color. It may have poorly defined edges that blend into the skin. These are called atypical moles, and they are benign (not cancerous). But they may be at greater risk of turning into melanoma (skin cancer). So always get them checked and keep an eye on them.

Cancerous moles have many tell-tale signs. They may be asymmetrical (shaped differently on each side). They are likely to have irregular borders. And they may be more than one color. They’re also likely to be larger than a pencil eraser and, very importantly, they change. Any mole that grows, bleeds, itches, or changes shape or color is a reason to see your doctor.

If you have a higher risk of melanoma, then it’s a good idea to regularly check your skin. Start by looking in a mirror and getting familiar with the moles you have. Note their size, shape, and location. Follow these steps:

- Check your front and back; then raise your arms and check your sides.
- Look at your palms, forearms, and upper arms (including the undersides).
- Inspect legs and feet (don’t forget backs of legs, between toes, and soles).
- Check your back, buttocks, and genital area with a hand mirror.
- Use a hand mirror to check your neck, face, and scalp (parting your hair).

Each time you check your skin, take note of any new moles or moles that change. Ask your doctor to look at anything suspicious. Sure, it may be nothing. But wouldn’t you rather be certain?

Having a lot of atypical moles isn’t the only risk factor for melanoma. Your risk may be higher if you:

- Are fair-skinned, with blond or red hair
- Are older than 65
- Have more than 50 moles
- Have had a serious sunburn (or have spent a lot of time tanning or in the sun)
- Have had skin cancer (or have a family history of it)
Diet and Exercise

Coffee: Good or Evil?

Your morning cup of coffee—is it the only thing standing between you and a cold, dark morning? How can coffee be evil when it tastes so good? We’ve heard warnings about the dangers of coffee for years. It’s even been blamed for health problems like heart disease and cancer. But there may be no need to worry. In moderation, coffee may actually be good for you.

Studies show you may be getting more than a caffeine buzz with that cup of joe. The antioxidant effects of coffee are surprisingly high—up to 5 times higher than green tea. New research has turned up other surprises, too. Coffee may actually lower your risk of cancer, diabetes, and Parkinson’s disease.

Coffee appears to have cancer-fighting properties. In a recent review, drinking 2 cups of coffee a day was found to reduce the risk of liver cancer by 43 percent. It may help protect against colon and rectal cancers, too. Also of note, coffee does not appear to play a role in causing a number of other cancers. These include breast, stomach, and prostate cancer.

Your coffee habit may also help prevent type 2 diabetes. Multiple studies now show that drinking coffee can reduce the risk of this disease. For every cup a person drinks each day, their risk may go down by as much as 5–10 percent. And it’s not just the caffeine doing this (decaf appears to work, too). Coffee contains natural chemicals that may help lower blood sugar.

Research has also found a link between coffee and Parkinson’s disease. Drinking more coffee, it seems, may lower your risk of getting the disease.

But all of this good news doesn’t mean more is better. As most coffee drinkers know, coffee has a downside, too.

Caffeine in coffee stimulates your central nervous system. This is what wakes you up and helps you feel alert. But too much stimulation is not a good thing. At higher doses, caffeine can speed up your heart, raise your blood pressure, cause headaches, keep you from sleeping, and leave you feeling jittery and anxious. Over time, some people may start to depend on caffeine to feel good. How much is too much? If you’re pregnant or have a health condition, ask your doctor how much caffeine is safe. There are no strict guidelines for caffeine intake. But you can get too much. At very high doses, caffeine can cause serious harm.

Health experts agree that moderate coffee drinking isn’t likely to hurt most people. And it may actually help in some ways. For most people, moderate means 2 to 4 cups of coffee a day. But keep in mind that everyone reacts differently to caffeine. So if you notice yourself getting jittery, you may need to cut back. If not, then you can sit back with your steaming, hot cup of java—and stop counting coffee among your sins.
At least 80 percent of smokers started their habit before age 18. Perhaps you were one of them? Kids are vulnerable to tobacco use for many reasons. One big factor is the influence adults have on their lives. Adults are role models for young people. An adult’s smoking behavior and attitudes can influence a young person’s choice to smoke—or not. What are your smoking habits saying to the young people in your life? And how can you help prevent them from ever lighting up?

For parents, the studies are clear: If you smoke, your child or teen is more likely to smoke. In one study, children of smokers were twice as likely to smoke as those of nonsmokers. Children of smokers were also more likely to start smoking at an early age and be heavy smokers. There may be 2 reasons for this. First, kids learn by doing what they see their parents do. Second, having parents who smoke may cause a child to see smoking in a positive light.

On the other hand, in studies of homes where smoking was banned, kids were less likely to try smoking. They were also less likely to be influenced by friends who smoke. Parents’ expectations of their kids mattered, too. Kids whose parents expected them to stay smoke-free found it easier to say no to smoking, even under social pressure.

Parents are not the only adults who can influence a young person’s choice to smoke. Other adult role models have a strong effect, too. Movie stars are a good example. Studies show that smoking in movies can cause kids to see smoking as glamorous and increase their odds of starting the habit. Are you a role model for a young person—as a teacher, a coach, or as a big brother or sister? If so, and you smoke, have you thought about what message you’re sending?

If you think your smoking may be sending the wrong message to a young person, take action now. Follow these tips to help keep kids smoke-free:

- **Set a good example.** If you smoke, make every effort to quit. Actions speak loudly. Talk to your doctor to get help, or check out the online tools and information at smokefree.gov or Healthyroads.com. If you can’t manage to quit right now, at least cut down on your cigarettes. Show that you’re trying.

- **Take steps if you’re not quitting.** Even if you’re not quitting, send the message that you know smoking is a bad idea. Never smoke in front of kids, and don’t leave cigarettes, lighters, or ashtrays where kids will see them. If you have kids at home, make the house a smoke-free zone. Talk with kids about your smoking habit—tell them how smoking has affected your life and how hard it is to quit. If you regret starting, say so.

- **Talk to kids about smoking.** Ask kids what they think about smoking. Find out if their friends smoke. The more you understand their feelings, thoughts, and lives, the more you can help and guide them.

- **Say no to smoking.** Make it clear that you don’t allow underage smoking. Say this even if you think kids won’t hear you. Your words and expectations have more power than you realize.

As a smoker, you know how hard cigarettes are to quit once you’re hooked. Spare a child this heartache. Send the message now that smoking is NOT OK—help ensure that the young people you care about never get hooked.

**SERIOUS ABOUT QUITTING?**

We at Healthyroads understand the challenges of quitting smoking. That’s why we offer a comprehensive Tobacco Cessation program that provides you with the best techniques to help you quit—once and for all. From our phone-based coaching program and educational materials to our online resources and nicotine replacement therapy products (if included in your benefit), we give you every chance to succeed. For anyone considering quitting smoking, take the first step and visit Healthyroads.com or contact us at 877.330.2746.

**Quitting Smoking**

**What Is Your Smoking Saying to Young People?**
If you’re like most people, you’ve noticed a few more aches and pains over the years. Maybe you work a high-stress job or sit at a desk all day. You’re not as active as you’d like to be, and you may have put on a few pounds. Maybe you take some of that stress home at night and don’t sleep well. You’d like to feel better and get back in shape. If this sounds like you, you may want to learn more about tai chi.

Tai chi is a meditative form of exercise from China. It started as a martial art, but soon became a health practice, too. To do tai chi, you slowly flow through a series of postures, many of which are named after animals. Forms can be short or long. And there are up to 100 postures. As you move, the focus is on breathing and sensations in your body. Many call tai chi “moving meditation.”

For the ancient Chinese, 2 main goals of tai chi were to balance “Yin” and “Yang,” and to promote the body’s flow of Qi (pronounced “chee”). Yin and Yang were seen as the universal opposites in nature. Think of light and dark, hot and cold, or push and pull. Tai chi movements were thought to balance these opposites. Qi was seen as natural life-force energy. The goal was to return health to the body by strengthening a person’s Qi and breaking up blocks in its flow.

Today, researchers know tai chi is great for your health. Not only can it help you have a stronger, more flexible body, but it can also help you:

- Feel calmer and less stressed
- Sleep better
- Have a stronger heart and cardiovascular system
- Find relief from chronic pain (for example, back or arthritis pain)
- Strengthen your bones
- Have better balance and reduce your chance of falling
- Lower your blood pressure
- Feel less depressed and anxious

To get started with tai chi, it’s best to take a class. Although there are many books and videos on tai chi, it’s better to find a qualified teacher. This isn’t like learning an aerobics routine. A teacher can ensure that your stance is stable, and that you are breathing and shifting your weight correctly. He or she can also teach you the philosophy behind the movements and help you perform them safely.

In a class, you will first learn proper tai chi stance. This involves standing with soft, bent knees, a tucked pelvis (to flatten your low back), and a tucked chin (as if the top of your head is being pulled up by a string). From there, you will likely learn how to breathe deeply into your belly, while slowly shifting your weight. Once you’ve learned these basics, you’re ready to start learning each posture and flowing them together.

To find a class near you, check your local YMCA, senior center, health club, or community center. Many colleges and martial arts studios also offer tai chi. Classes may take place once a week. But to really reap the health benefits of tai chi, try making it a daily practice on your own. Over time, you may find it changes how you look, feel, and move in your body.

Low-Stress Living
Tai Chi: Your Prescription for Better Health