

# Foot Melanoma

This type of skin cancer is a relatively common (and often deadly) disease.

As the summer pedicure rush arrives, you'll need to be armed with more than just the right products to create a great set of toenails; you should also be prepared with the facts about one of the deadliest forms of skin cancer: malignant melanoma—and specifically, foot melanoma. Though this disease can easily turn life-threatening, nail techs can help with early detection by properly checking the areas around your clients' feet, ankles and legs—the lower extremities that many clients don't bother to closely examine themselves. In this Nail Clinic, we'll give you the facts about foot melanoma and how you can provide your clients with a major line of defense against the development of this disease.

## Melanoma Statistics\*

- Half of the people diagnosed with melanoma of the foot die within five years.
- Nearly 60,000 people will learn that they have melanoma this year.
- If melanoma is detected in its earliest stages, 92 percent of sufferers are alive after five years.
- Caucasians are 10 times more likely to develop melanoma than African Americans.

\*Source: American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons, [www.footphysicians.com](http://www.footphysicians.com)

## A Mountain Out of a Mole

Foot melanoma is a subset of malignant melanoma, a dangerous type of skin cancer. "There are three major types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma," says Raffy Karamanoukian, an esthetic plastic surgeon in Santa Monica, California, and assistant clinical professor at the University of California, Irvine. "Of the three types, melanoma is the deadliest."

There are four types of melanoma: superficial spreading melanoma, nodular melanoma, lentigo maligna melanoma and acral lentiginous melanoma. **Acral lentiginous melanoma** is the least common but it's the one most

often found on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet and underneath fingernails and toenails.

According to the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons (ACFAS), malignant melanoma can appear anywhere on the body, but when it appears on the foot or ankle, it often goes unnoticed in the early stages—when the disease is most amenable to treatment. "According to the World Health Organization, there are about 160,000 reported cases of malignant melanoma every year, and 48,000 melanoma-related deaths," says Neil Campbell, DPM, FACFAS, a foot and ankle surgeon from Yoakum, Texas, and a spokesperson for ACFAS. "While malignant melanoma represents



**This foot has acral lentiginous melanoma.**

“A nail tech should begin each service by evaluating the feet and ankles for suspicious moles, including the soles of the feet and between toes.”

just five percent of all skin cancers, it is responsible for more than 75 percent of the deaths caused by skin cancer overall.”

Melanoma occurs “for unknown reasons,” says Hrach Karamanoukian, a cardiothoracic and general surgeon in Williamsville, New York, and brother of Raffy Karamanoukian. “It is a malignant tumor of the pigment cells of the skin; these cells begin to replicate and grow uncontrollably, leading to a collection of pigment under the skin.” These changes in the cells lead to changes on the skin, which can indicate possible melanoma: a change in a mole’s shape, size and/or color, for example.

ACFAS reports that melanoma usually looks like a spot on the skin that is predominantly brown, black or blue—it can also be mostly red, or even white—but not all of the spots on the skin necessarily signal melanoma. The organization points out the four typical warning signs of moles, known as the ABCDEs of melanoma:

- **Asymmetry:** With melanoma, one half of the mole is shaped differently than the other half
- **Border irregularity:** The border (or edge) is ragged, notched or blurred
- **Color:** Melanoma is usually a mixture of hues rather than a single, solid color
- **Diameter:** Melanoma grows in

width; a spot larger than five millimeters (the size of a pencil eraser) is cause for concern

- **Elevation:** If a mole becomes raised, it should be checked by a physician. The organization also points out that a visit to a surgeon is necessary if there’s any discoloration underneath the toenail that wasn’t caused by trauma, so if you notice this under a client’s nail, ask her about the cause

“The biggest misconception about melanoma is that it only occurs on sun-exposed areas of the skin,” says Raffy. “That’s completely wrong! It often occurs in less-exposed areas, such as the hands and feet.”

### Prevention and Detection

“One large study in the United States and Australia stated that the lower extremities were the second most common site of malignant melanoma, representing 30 percent of all reported cases,” Campbell says. “The study did not differentiate between the thigh, leg, ankle or foot, but it is well accepted that malignant melanoma is the most common malignant tumor in the foot or ankle.” It is particularly alarming because it often goes unnoticed, leading to a higher mortality rate among those with the disease; when the cancer is allowed to spread, it can affect other areas of the body.

Prevention should always begin with protection from the sun. "It's important to wear appropriate shoes that cover the entire foot and to apply sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30," Campbell advises. "People should avoid the sun during peak hours and put sunscreen on the bottoms of their feet if they are sunbathing on their stomachs." As a nail tech, you can help your clients by educating them about the use of sunscreen on the feet, and it's a good idea to apply sunscreen after every pedicure so that when clients leave, they'll be protected in their summer sandals.

When determining whether or not you should speak to a client about a suspicious mark, discoloration or mole—it's best to err on the side of caution.

While sun exposure is an important risk factor for melanoma, Hratch explains that there are other risk factors, including genetics, skin complexion and hair color—those with fair skin, blue eyes and light blonde or red hair are more at risk. "Lifelong avoidance of direct sun exposure can lead to a lower incidence of melanoma," he says. But early detection is the best way to fight the disease.

### Doing Your Part

Sunscreen and client education can certainly help, but you'll do best by making regular foot inspections a part of every pedicure appointment. "Nail technicians are extremely important because they can be the front line in the early diagnosis of

malignant melanoma," Campbell says. "Evaluation of the nail bed after polish or enhancement removal should be performed during every visit with every client. Looking between the toes is an important task that's frequently difficult for clients, but is quite easy for a nail technician. Techs may also find it helpful to print out the ABCDEs of melanoma and post them in a prominent area." (You can find these guidelines, with sample images of warning signs, at [www.footphysicians.com/footankleinfo/malignant\\_melanoma.htm](http://www.footphysicians.com/footankleinfo/malignant_melanoma.htm).)

"Salon specialists can play a very important role in identifying and alerting clients to suspicious moles," Raffy agrees. "A nail tech should begin each service by evaluating the feet and ankles for suspicious moles, including the soles of the feet and between the toes." Look for moles with the classic warning signs, particularly ones that are in varying shades of color, feel painful and have scabbing of the surface. Ask the client to watch her moles and go to a physician if she sees any changes. "Teach clients to take responsibility for themselves, especially if they have a family history of skin cancer," Raffy says.

When determining whether or not you should speak to a client about a suspicious mark, discoloration or mole on her foot or ankle—or anywhere else on her body—it's best to err on the side of caution. You'll gain the trust and devotion of your client when she notices your concern for her entire well-being, not just her nails! And you could certainly make the greatest difference possible by leading the way to an early detection. "Always be conservative," Hratch says. "You can never look bad by suggesting that a client see a specialist. You never know—you could save a life one day!" 📌

---

Tracy Morin is a freelance writer and editor based in Oxford, Mississippi. She can be reached at [tracy.morin@gmail.com](mailto:tracy.morin@gmail.com).