

Spouses can boost early detection for melanoma patients

April 18 2018, by Lindsey Tanner



In this June 26, 2015, file photo, a couple holds hands during their wedding ceremony in Atlanta. In a report released on Wednesday, April 18, 2018, researchers found that melanoma patients who are married tend to be diagnosed at an earlier more treatable stage than patients who are unmarried, widowed or divorced. (AP Photo/John Bazemore, File)

There's an extra bonus to marriage for melanoma patients: They tend to be diagnosed in earlier more treatable stages than patients who are unmarried, widowed or divorced, a new study says.

Spouses may be apt to notice suspicious moles on their partners that could signal melanoma, the most dangerous type [skin](#) cancer. More importantly, they may also be more inclined to nag their partners to get those moles checked out, the researchers said.

The findings suggest that unmarried people should ask relatives or friends to do skin checks or seek frequent skin exams with dermatologists.

Why marriage might a difference in diagnosis isn't clear since unmarried partners or observant friends might also notice skin changes. But maybe married people have more opportunities to notice or feel more of a responsibility to keep their partners healthy, said study co-authors Cimarron Sharon and Dr. Giorgos Karakousis of the University of Pennsylvania.

Researchers analyzed 52,000 melanoma patients in a U.S. government cancer database who were diagnosed from 2010 to 2014. Melanoma is more likely than other skin cancers to spread beyond the initial tumor site to other organs, but all the patients had localized disease.

Among married patients studied, almost 47 percent had the smallest, earliest-stage tumors compared with 43 percent of never-married patients, 39 percent of divorced patients and 32 percent of widowed patients.

Just 3 percent of married participants had the most ominous tumors compared with almost 10 percent of widowed patients. Married patients also were more likely than the others to receive biopsies of nearby lymph

nodes, usually recommended to guide treatment.

The study, published Wednesday in *JAMA Dermatology*, echoes previous research that found advanced melanoma that has spread is less common in married [patients](#).

Melanoma often looks like a misshapen mole, with a diameter larger than a pencil eraser and can be a blend of black, brown, tan or even bluish pigment. It's linked with too much exposure to sun or tanning beds. It's also more common in fair-skinned people and those with lots of moles.

The American Cancer Society estimates that about 90,000 U.S. cases will be diagnosed this year.

Amanda Palmer, 37, was diagnosed with early-stage [melanoma](#) seven years ago after her husband noticed a suspicious mole on her right leg and kept pestering her about it.

"He wouldn't let up until I finally agreed to go to the doctor," said Palmer, who is from the Washington D.C.-area.

Palmer said surgery to remove her [cancer](#) and surrounding tissue left a 4-inch scar. She gets frequent skin exams, and she and her husband do mutual skin checks. He also reminds her to wear heavy-duty sunscreen every time she leaves the house.

"I nag him about plenty of things," she said. "I figure he can have one thing he nags me about."

More information: Cimarron E. Sharon et al. Association of Marital Status With T Stage at Presentation and Management of Early-Stage Melanoma, *JAMA Dermatology* (2018). [DOI:](#)

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