What is Melanoma?

The most dangerous form of skin cancer, these cancerous growths develop when unrepaired DNA damage to skin cells (most often caused by ultraviolet radiation from sunshine or tanning beds) triggers mutations (genetic defects) that lead the skin cells to multiply rapidly and form malignant tumors. These tumors originate in the pigment-producing melanocytes in the basal layer of the epidermis. Melanomas often resemble moles; some develop from moles.

The majority of melanomas are black or brown, but they can also be skin-colored, pink, red, purple, blue or white. Melanoma is caused mainly by intense, occasional UV exposure (frequently leading to sunburn), especially in those who are genetically predisposed to the disease. Melanoma kills an estimated 10,130 people in the US annually.

If melanoma is recognized and treated early, it is almost always curable, but if it is not, the cancer can advance and spread to other parts of the body, where it becomes hard to treat and can be fatal. While it is not the most common of the skin cancers, it causes the most deaths. In 2016, an estimated 76,380 of these will be invasive melanomas, with about 46,870 in males and 29,510 in women.