

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **Australians warned of unprecedented skin cancer risk**

Experts fear they will see a frightening spike in skin cancers and melanomas in coming months, with a dangerous combination of factors likely to make this summer more hazardous than any in the past.

Startling data shows a worrying decrease in people seeking specialist advice for skin conditions during the COVID-19 lockdowns, while experts are also concerned that sun smart basics may be neglected in the rush to get back to normality during summer.

Professor Mark Shackleton, Chairman of Melanoma and Skin Cancer Trials (MASC Trials), urged people to get their skin checked for any concerning spots, and to exercise common sense when heading to the beach, beer gardens or any favourite outdoor summer activity.

“Australia already has one of the highest rates of melanoma in the world<sup>1</sup>, but the impact of COVID-19 brings a new challenge,” Professor Shackleton said.

“Data collected by the Victorian Melanoma Service indicate that patients referred with melanoma were down 48.0% from April to August 2020 compared to the same period over the previous 3 years – suggesting that people were simply not seeing their doctors about skin spots as they normally would.

“At the same time, people are desperate to get out into the fresh air and reclaim normality – when combined with a drop in early diagnoses, we have the perfect storm for heightened skin cancer risk and increased deaths from advanced, incurable disease.

“Early detection of melanoma is critical and can significantly improve outcomes. The real fear is that we will see the impact of delayed diagnosis of melanoma materialise in more severe cases, as a result of COVID-19, over the coming months and years.”

MASC Trials is one of the few dedicated melanoma and skin cancer clinical trials group in the world. Working with talented researchers across Australia and around the globe, it develops and conducts clinical trials that are changing how we diagnose and treat melanoma and skin cancer.

“Melanoma and skin cancer cost Australia’s healthcare system over \$1 billion dollars a year; and despite high-profile public awareness campaigns, this cost has doubled over the past decade,” Professor Shackleton said.

“While clinical trials have driven major breakthroughs in treatments for advanced melanomas, we need new treatments and better ways to diagnose this disease early or prevent it altogether – further research and trials are vital. It is also critical that people take as much care as possible of their skin when they are in the sun.


Professor Shackleton said that with the average clinical trial costing at least \$3 million, more funding was vital.

Close to one Australian is diagnosed with melanoma every half hour, and more than 1700 Australians died of melanoma in 2019 alone – many of them in the prime of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019, *Cancer in Australia 2019*, AIHW, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019, *Australian Cancer Incidence and Mortality*, AIHW, Canberra.



Often melanoma has very few symptoms, and the first sign is generally a change in an existing mole or the appearance of a new skin spot. New spots or changing moles should be examined by a doctor as soon as possible, regardless of concerns about COVID.

With one Aussie diagnosed every 30 minutes, melanoma is often called our national cancer. But Australia is now turning that tide and MASC Trials is leading the search to find a cure and improve treatment outcomes. The research being done in Australia is some of the most exciting and promising anywhere in the world.