

Can you spot a MELANOMA?

AUSTRALIA HAS ONE THE HIGHEST
RATES OF SKIN CANCER IN THE WORLD.
SHEREE MUTTON REVEALS THE SIGNS YOU SHOULD
LOOK OUT FOR AND HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF
FROM THE SUN'S DANGEROUS RAYS

Adam Brook owes his life to a haircut. When the 27-year-old personal trainer from Tamworth booked in for a regular trim last year, he had no idea that it would forever change his life. During the appointment, Adam was informed by his hairdresser that there was a suspicious mole, just above his right ear. "To be honest, I always knew it was there, but I never took much notice of it," he recalls. "Not until it was pointed out to me that day at the hairdresser. That conversation potentially saved my life."

Looking back, Adam says at first, he didn't think much of it. "I said something to my mother about it and she pestered me to go and get it looked at. I left it for a few months before going to a dermatologist to get it cut off, purely just to keep Mum happy so she would leave me alone about it." Within days Adam received a call from

the doctor. "I got the phone call from the dermatologist on a Sunday. I think I will remember that day for the rest of my life."

Life-changing diagnosis

Adam was shocked to learn that it was in fact melanoma. "I will be forever grateful to her [the hairdresser] and my mum for staying persistent in getting that mole looked at, otherwise I certainly would not have gone out of my way to do so, until it was too late." Adam was immediately referred to the Melanoma Institute of Australia and a head and neck specialist. He then underwent two days of testing and scans before getting

the news that the melanoma was already Stage 3. "It had entered the lymph nodes in my neck and started to spread through my body. Thankfully, the scans showed it was not any lower than my collarbone, so the game plan was to cut just above my ear on my head,

down my neck to my collarbone, then along my collarbone to the centre of my chest and remove all affected and any nearby lymph nodes."

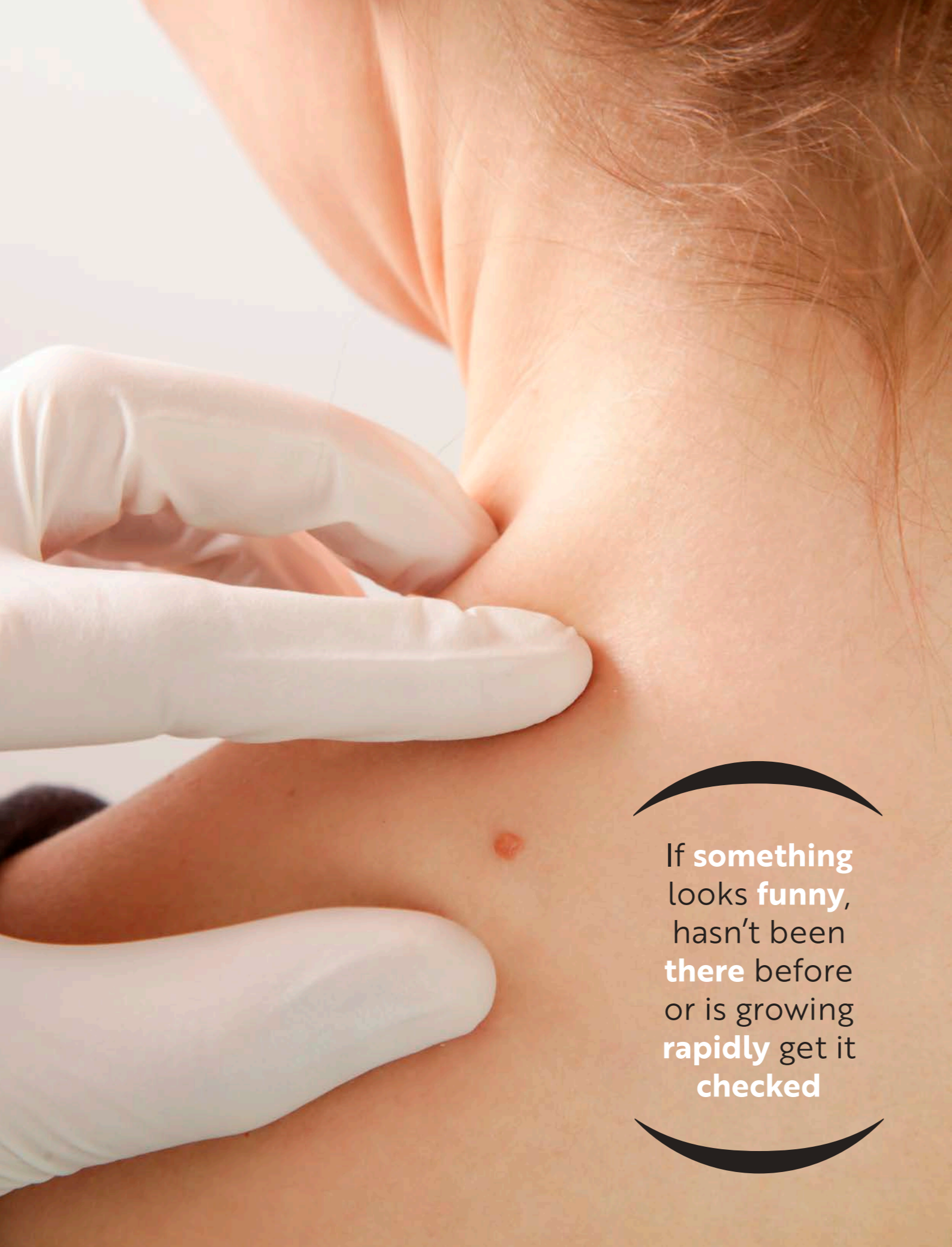
Although Adam is still undergoing immunotherapy, he wears the 40cm scar with pride, knowing that it represents his story of survival. "I had never had a skin check in my life, never even gave it a thought. That could have prevented the seriousness of my diagnosis and not put me in the position I am now, and will be for the rest of my life," he says. That neglect, and being so naive to the risk, is what nearly cost me my life."

Like Adam, Gina Savage also discovered a lump in her hair. She was just 20 years old when she was diagnosed with melanoma. "A lump on my scalp would bleed every time I brushed my hair, so [I] was referred straight to a plastic surgeon by my father," says Gina.

Prevention is crucial

"Everyone was completely shocked when it came back as melanoma after a routine biopsy post excision. We had no family history and as a child I was »

It had entered
the lymph
nodes in my
neck and
started to
spread through
my body



If something looks funny, hasn't been there before or is growing rapidly get it checked

PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES

always kept very sun safe by my parents and continued that my whole life.”

Now, 24, Gina was informed by doctors earlier last year that the cancer had already spread. “When we found out it had spread to not only further in my lungs, but to my pelvis, my abdomen and most frighteningly my liver, I was told it was very likely I had only six months to live.”

Gina has since undergone five surgeries to her head and neck and endured two rounds of radiotherapy. “While doctors and health professionals have made major breakthroughs in the treatment of advanced melanoma, there are patients like myself who are not responding to the current available treatments as well as hoped,” she says. Gina is about to start on a trial drug, but is adamant that prevention is the best cure for melanoma.

“Prevalence is high but so is preventability,” she says. “If something looks funny, hasn’t been there before or is growing rapidly, get it checked,” she adds. “We are growing up in a world, and particularly the Australian culture, where roasting yourself like a rotisserie chicken is the depiction of beauty. Trust me, when you’re fighting for your life, a natural golden tan will not matter.”

The facts

Melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer and according to the Melanoma Institute of Australia, it’s also the most common cancer affecting Australians aged between 15 and 39. Every year, there are about 15,000 diagnoses of melanoma. Of those, it’s estimated that 1726 people will die.

The first sign of melanoma is often a changing mole or a new skin spot that looks like a mole. But if caught early, 90 percent of melanomas can be cured with surgery.

Dermatologist Dr John Sullivan says that regular skin checks should be scheduled, depending on your skin

type, family history and sun exposure. “People with fair skin, blue eyes, red, blond and light hair colour [and] freckles need regular checks,” he explains. “For most in this category, seeing their GP once a year, and if their doctor thinks appropriate, a specialist dermatologist.”

Sunlight remains the biggest preventable factor and according to Dr Sullivan, spending prolonged periods outdoors can increase your risk of melanoma significantly. “Intermittent heavy sun exposure and sunburn, along with regular sun exposure can increase risk,” he says.

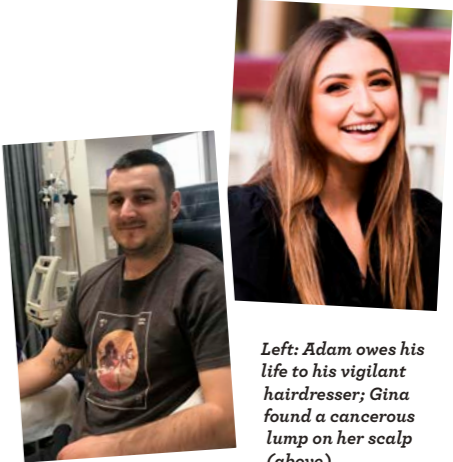
You can avoid sunburn by minimising sun exposure during the middle of the day when UV levels are most intense and wearing SPF50+ broad spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen. The Cancer Council recommends applying sunscreen 20 minutes before going outdoors and throughout the day.

Other sun protection clothing should be worn such as sunglasses and a hat that covers the head, neck and ears.

Many other factors also raise your chances of developing melanoma, including medication, the number of moles you have and your family history, especially if one or more close relatives – parents, brothers, sisters or children – has had melanoma. “For families with melanoma, particularly if these have occurred at a young age (under the age 50) their offspring should consult their doctor in their teens to assess their risks,” advises Dr Sullivan. “For those on certain medications their risk is also increased, particularly medications to prevent transplant rejection.”

People with many moles should have their skin checked more regularly, as melanoma can develop both in an existing mole, and in normal skin. “However, the most important time to have your skin checked is if you have a new skin lesion or change in

‘AVOID SUNBURN BY MINIMISING SUN EXPOSURE DURING THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY’



Left: Adam owes his life to his vigilant hairdresser; Gina found a cancerous lump on her scalp (above).

a skin lesion,” explains Dr Sullivan. “Don’t watch a lesion progressively change waiting for your annual check, see someone promptly. Early diagnosis and early removal is preferred.”

Check your skin

Between appointments with your doctor, use the ABCDE method (below) to help identify and assess your moles. “Looking for change and regularly checking your skin is most important,” says Dr Sullivan.

LOOK OUT FOR:

A: ASYMMETRY
(a mole that is not even in shape, contours and colouring).

B: BORDER
(irregular, jagged borders).

C: COLOUR
(such as brown, red, white or black).

D: DIAMETER
(greater than 6mm).

E: EVOLVING
(a mole that rapidly changes in shape, size, thickness or colour).