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How to Tell the Difference Between Freckles, Sunspots, and Moles

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | July 04, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Freckles are small, flat, light brown spots that darken in summer and fade in winter; they typically appear in clusters on sun-exposed areas
- Moles can be flat or raised, tan to dark brown, sometimes with hair, and should be monitored for skin cancer warning signs
- Sunspots, often called liver spots, are signs of oxidative damage — not just sun exposure — and reflect excess linoleic acid (LA) and iron in your body
- Lipofuscin, a waste product formed when oxidized LA binds with iron, builds up in sun-exposed skin as you age, creating the brown pigmentation seen in sunspots
- Checking your serum ferritin levels and reducing LA intake helps prevent and reverse oxidative stress that leads to sunspots and premature skin aging

Have you ever looked in the mirror and wondered about those little marks on your skin? Maybe they're freckles from your childhood, sunspots from sunny vacations or moles you've had forever. These spots are more than just part of your look — they're clues to your health.

The good news? You can take charge of your wellness starting today. In this guide, you'll learn what freckles, sunspots and moles really are, how to tell them apart and what to do if they signal trouble. Get ready to feel confident about your skin and empowered to keep it healthy.

What Do Your Skin Spots Look Like?

Your skin is like a scrapbook, full of stories from sunny days and family traits. To understand those stories, you need to know what each spot looks like. Let's break it down so you can spot freckles, sunspots and moles with ease.

- **Freckles — tiny paint splatters —** Picture freckles as tiny paint splatters on your skin. They're small, flat and usually light brown or tan. You'll often see them in clusters on your face, arms or shoulders. These spots love the sun — they get darker in summer and fade in winter, especially if your skin is fair. Freckles are common and usually no big deal.[1]

  It's interesting to note that newborns are rarely born with freckles; they typically start appearing in early childhood after sun exposure. The tendency to develop freckles is strongly linked to the presence of a gene that affects the type of melanin produced by your body.[2]

- **Sunspots — sun's lasting marks —** Sunspots are flat, brownish and can be as small as a pencil eraser or as big as a small coin. Look for them on sun-exposed areas like your hands, face or chest. Unlike freckles, they don't fade with the seasons — they stick around all year.[3]

- **Moles — little skin islands —** Think of moles as little islands on your skin. They can be flat or raised, tan to dark brown, and sometimes even have hair growing from them. Moles can pop up anywhere — not just where the sun hits — and they're usually permanent. Most are harmless, but it's smart to keep an eye on them.

  The number of moles a person has can vary greatly, with some individuals having only a few while others have many. Most moles develop during childhood and adolescence, but it's also common to develop new moles in adulthood, particularly during periods of hormonal change like pregnancy.

The Root Causes — Why Do These Spots Appear?

Why does your skin decide to sprinkle itself with spots? It's a mix of your genes and how much sun you've soaked up. Here are several reasons why freckles, sunspots, and moles show up.

- **Freckles — a combination of genetics and sun —** Freckles are like your skin dancing with the sun, guided by your family traits. If you've got fair skin and freckles run in your family, sunlight tells your skin to sprinkle extra color in tiny dots. It's a natural occurrence — not a sign something's wrong.

- **Sunspots — oxidative damage from linoleic acid (LA) and iron —** Unlike freckles, sunspots aren't just about melanin buildup. They also contain lipofuscin, a brown pigment made from oxidized LA bound to excess iron. High levels of LA from vegetable oils, combined with elevated iron, create oxidative damage that builds up in sun-exposed skin over time. That's why these spots become more visible with age.

- **Moles — clusters of character —** Moles are like little bursts of personality, shaped by your DNA and sometimes the sun. Some appear when you're born, while others grow later as you age or catch some rays. They happen when pigment cells clump together instead of spreading out evenly.

Sunspots Are Signs of Oxidative Stress

Sunspots are more than just the result of sun exposure — they're a visible sign of oxidative damage happening under the surface. What many people don't realize is that sunspots, which are sometimes called liver spots, are largely made up of a substance called lipofuscin.

- **Lipofuscin is often described as a type of "age pigment" —** More accurately, it's the accumulation of cellular waste formed when LA, a polyunsaturated fat found in vegetable oils, gets oxidized by excess iron in your body. In other words, lipofuscin is a byproduct of oxidative damage — and the brown spots you see are your skin's way of showing it.

- **High levels of iron act as a catalyst for this process —** This is especially true when combined with a high intake of LA. The result? An overload of oxidative byproducts that collect in your skin, especially in sun-exposed areas. Over time, this creates the brown pigmentation we recognize as sunspots or liver spots.

- **This process doesn't just affect your appearance —** It could also signal an increased risk of skin aging and even cancer. That's why I recommend checking your iron levels with a simple blood test called a **serum ferritin test**.

  Ideally, your ferritin should fall between 35 and 45 ng/mL. If it's higher, regular blood donation — two to four times per year — is an effective, natural way to remove excess iron and reduce oxidative stress. You can also remove smaller amounts monthly if needed.

- **Another helpful screening tool is a gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (GGT) test —** This serves as a proxy for free iron levels and oxidative stress. Elevated GGT indicates an increased risk for cardiometabolic disease and even sudden cardiac death.

So, while sunspots seem like simple cosmetic issues, they're actually telling you a deeper story about your internal health. Treat them as a signal to evaluate your diet and iron load.

When Should You Worry?

Most skin spots are just part of your unique look, but some hint at bigger issues. Knowing what to watch for is important to help you catch problems early. Here's how to tell if your spots need extra attention.

- **Freckles are usually safe —** Freckles are usually harmless, but if one starts growing, changing color or looking unusual, take notice. It's rare, but a changing freckle could mean something serious like skin cancer. Don't panic — just get it checked out.

- **Sunspots are caution signs —** Sunspots look harmless, but they're more than just souvenirs from sunny days. This buildup of cellular waste is a visible sign of deeper oxidative stress and damage to your skin. If they get bigger, darker or have uneven edges, they might signal skin cancer. Don't brush off those changes — get them checked out by a dermatologist.

- **Moles — Check the ABCDEs —** Moles are often just beauty marks, but some hide risks like melanoma. Use this simple ABCDE checklist to stay on top of them.[4] If a mole shows any of these signs, see a doctor right away. Early action is your best defense:

    - **A**symmetry — One side doesn't match the other.
    - **B**order — Edges are jagged or blurry.
    - **C**olor — Mixed colors or odd shades.
    - **D**iameter — Bigger than a pencil eraser (about 6 millimeters).
    - **E**volving — It's changing in size, shape or feel.

How to Monitor and Protect Your Skin

You've got the know-how — now it's time to take control. **Keeping your skin healthy** is easier than you think with a few simple habits. Here's how to stay on top of your spots and shield your skin.

- **Do a monthly skin check —** Grab a mirror and set a monthly date to look over your skin. Check your front, back and sides — use a hand mirror for spots like your scalp or back. Look for new spots and note any changes.

- **Embrace the sun safely —** **Regular sun exposure** is key for optimal health. However, it's best to avoid direct sunlight during peak hours (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) until you've cut back on LA-rich vegetable oils for at least six months. When LA accumulated in

your skin interacts with the sun's UV rays, it triggers inflammation and DNA damage.

- **Know when to call a pro —** If a spot starts growing, itching or changing colors, don't wait. Make an appointment with a dermatologist. Spotting issues early keeps your skin in top shape.

Your skin's story is yours to write. You now know how to spot freckles, sunspots and moles, why they pop up and when to get them checked. With a quick monthly scan and some sun-smart moves, you're already building a foundation for healthier skin. Add in some skin-boosting tools, like **healthy foods**, **methylene blue** and **niacinamide**, and you're on your way to a healthier you.

FAQs — Your Top Skin Spot Questions Answered

Q: What's the difference between a freckle and a sunspot?

A: Freckles are small, light brown spots that darken in the sun and fade in winter. Sunspots are larger, darker and stay year-round. They often contain lipofuscin, a compound formed by the oxidation of LA and iron, which signals deeper oxidative damage in your skin.

Q: Can moles turn into cancer?

A: Yes, some moles can become melanoma, a type of skin cancer. Watch for asymmetry, unusual borders, odd colors, size over 6 millimeters or changes. Make it a habit to regularly examine your moles for any of these warning signs.

Q: How can I protect my skin from the sun?

A: Embrace the sun safely by avoiding peak hours (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) until you've cut back on vegetable oils, which contain LA, for six months. This helps reduce inflammation and DNA damage from UV rays, caused by LA accumulated in your skin.

Also, consider checking your serum ferritin levels to ensure your iron is in the optimal range (35 to 45 ng/mL). Reducing both LA and excess iron helps minimize oxidative stress and prevent sunspots and premature aging.

Q: When should I see a doctor about a skin spot?

A: If a spot grows, itches, bleeds or looks different from others, see a dermatologist. Quick action catches problems early. Don't hesitate to schedule an appointment if you have any concerns about a skin spot.

Q: Are certain people more prone to developing these skin spots?

A: Yes, individuals with fair skin and a family history of freckles are more likely to develop them. Sunspots, on the other hand, are more common in those with high iron levels, elevated LA intake and cumulative sun exposure. The number of moles a person has is often genetically determined.

Sources and References

- [1] MoleMap September 27, 2024
- [2, 3] The Conversation March 28, 2025
- [4] Phelps Health June 10, 2022