

What Is the Difference Between Sunspots and Skin Cancer?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Sunspots usually stay flat and stable over time, while skin cancer often changes shape, color, texture, or sensation as abnormal cells grow and spread
- › Melanoma warning signs follow the ABCDE rule: asymmetry, irregular borders, uneven color, larger diameter, and evolution over time, giving you a simple way to check your own skin each month
- › Many sunspots contain lipofuscin, a waste pigment that researchers believe may form when linoleic acid from seed oils oxidizes in the presence of excess iron and sunlight
- › Elevated ferritin and GGT levels have been associated with higher oxidative stress, which some researchers suggest may be reflected in the skin
- › Lowering seed oil intake, reducing excess iron, using sunlight strategically, and acting quickly when a spot changes may help reduce oxidative stress on the skin and support earlier detection of changes

Brown spots on your skin don't always mean the same thing. Some are harmless signs of aging. Others are early warnings of skin cancer. Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, spreads quickly once it moves beyond the skin. Sunspots and skin cancer often appear on the same areas of your body, which is exactly why so many people struggle to tell them apart. Yet one stays stable for years while the other behaves in ways that should immediately grab your attention.

The distinction comes down to behavior, not just appearance. Harmless spots tend to sit quietly on your skin and look the same month after month. Dangerous lesions act differently, often sending signals through changes you can see and sensations you can feel. Knowing what separates the two gives you a practical way to check your own skin without relying on guesswork.

At the same time, sunspots tell an important story about your internal health. These marks aren't simply cosmetic souvenirs of past sunburns. They reflect years of accumulated oxidative stress driven by what you eat, what you store in your tissues, and how those factors interact with sunlight.

Your skin is the only organ you can watch in real time, and what shows up on the surface often mirrors what's happening underneath. Once you understand how harmless sunspots differ from dangerous skin lesions, and what both reveal about your overall health, the warning signs become far easier to recognize before serious damage takes hold.

Dangerous Skin Changes Rarely Stay Quiet

As noted in a Health report,¹ ordinary [sunspots](#), also called age spots or liver spots, usually appear as flat brown marks that remain consistent over time. [Skin cancer](#) behaves very differently. Cancerous lesions often grow, change shape, bleed, crust over, or develop multiple colors as abnormal cells multiply uncontrollably.

Both conditions commonly appear on sun-exposed areas such as your face, scalp, shoulders, and hands, which is why so many people confuse one for the other. That misunderstanding delays diagnosis and treatment.

- **Sunspots usually look uniform, while suspicious lesions appear irregular and unpredictable** — Sunspots tend to stay round or oval with even coloring ranging from light brown to black. In contrast, dangerous lesions often become raised, uneven, or jagged around the borders. Some develop patches of pink, red, blue, or

black within the same spot. That difference gives you a practical framework for checking your own skin instead of relying on vague guesses about what "looks normal."

- **Melanoma follows a warning pattern that becomes easier to spot once you learn the ABCDE rule** — "A" stands for asymmetry, meaning one half of the mole doesn't match the other. "B" refers to irregular borders. "C" means uneven color patterns. "D" refers to diameter larger than a pea or pencil eraser, while "E" stands for evolving, meaning the lesion changes over time. Once you memorize those five signs, your monthly skin checks become far more effective and less overwhelming.
- **Basal cell carcinoma often disguises itself as a harmless sore or irritation** — The most common skin cancer frequently appears as a pearly pink bump with raised edges and a lower center. Some lesions ooze, crust over, or bleed repeatedly before partially healing and reopening again. Many people dismiss these sores as acne, dry skin, or irritation.

Meanwhile, cancer cells continue growing beneath the surface. Recognizing that pattern early gives you a major advantage before deeper tissue becomes involved.

- **Squamous cell carcinoma usually creates rough, scaly patches that refuse to heal normally** — This form of skin cancer often resembles eczema, irritation, or wart-like growths. These lesions commonly appear red or darkened and sometimes form open sores that bleed or crust over. If you notice a patch that stays inflamed for weeks, your skin is sending a warning signal that deserves attention.
- **Pain, tenderness, and itching often separate dangerous lesions from ordinary age spots** — Sunspots typically remain painless and flat. Cancerous lesions, on the other hand, frequently itch, sting, bleed, or become tender. Those sensations reflect active tissue damage and abnormal cellular growth. Both sunspots and skin cancer develop most often on areas exposed to years of ultraviolet (UV) radiation, including the lips, ears, neck, and hands.

However, melanoma sometimes appears in places many people don't think to examine, including under fingernails, inside the eye, or within the nose and mouth. A thorough skin check means looking beyond obvious sun-exposed regions. Hidden areas matter too. Regular self-checks teach you what your normal skin looks like. Once you notice a spot changing size, color, texture, or sensation, acting immediately shifts the odds strongly in your favor.

Your Age Spots Reveal Deeper Damage

Once you know how to spot dangerous changes, the next question is why sunspots form in the first place, and the answer says a lot about what's happening inside your body. Sunspots aren't simply cosmetic signs of aging. Many sunspots contain lipofuscin, a waste material that builds up after years of oxidative stress and cellular injury. Oxidative stress means your cells face repeated damage from unstable molecules called free radicals.

Linoleic acid (LA) from seed oils may interact with excess iron and sunlight exposure to contribute to this damage over time.² Many people treat sunspots as a beauty issue while ignoring the underlying metabolic strain. Every new dark spot becomes a reminder to evaluate what enters your body on a regular basis.

- **Modern dietary fats connect to visible skin aging** — LA is a polyunsaturated fat heavily concentrated in seed oils, like soybean oil, corn oil, cottonseed oil, sunflower oil, safflower oil, and grapeseed oil, and **ultraprocessed foods**.

Once it accumulates in your tissues, sunlight interacts with it and triggers oxidative reactions that damage skin cells. Lipofuscin is often described as "age pigment." The brown color forms because oxidized fats and iron byproducts build up inside damaged cells.³ Those deposits become more noticeable after years of repeated exposure.

- **Excess iron acts like fuel poured onto a fire — Elevated iron levels** may accelerate oxidation and appear to intensify tissue damage when combined with high LA intake.⁴ This creates a cycle where damaged fats produce more oxidative byproducts, which then collect in sun-exposed skin. Think of it like rust spreading across metal after years of moisture and oxygen exposure. Your skin records that damage in real time. Spots become darker and more visible as the process continues year after year.
- **A simple blood test gives you a measurable way to track iron-related stress —** A serum ferritin test measures stored iron inside your body. Ideal ferritin levels are roughly 60 to 75 ng/mL. Higher numbers suggest excess iron accumulation, which research has associated with greater oxidative stress.⁵ Instead of guessing, you get a concrete number that helps track your progress over time.
- **Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase, or GGT, is another important marker —** GGT is an enzyme your liver releases, and it shows up on most standard blood panels — ask your doctor to include it next time you get bloodwork. While GGT is a blood test commonly associated with liver health, it may also reflect oxidative stress and free iron activity inside your body. Elevated GGT has been linked to higher oxidative stress.⁶ Your skin sometimes reveals that burden before other symptoms appear.
- **Reducing stored iron via blood donation is a practical strategy —** For people with elevated iron, research suggests regular blood donation can lower stored iron.⁷ How often to donate or whether therapeutic phlebotomy is appropriate is best decided with your health care provider. For people whose ferritin remains elevated, two to four donations per year may be ideal.

Smaller monthly donations are another option for people needing tighter iron management. If you can't donate blood, therapeutic phlebotomy can be prescribed by your doctor.

Note: Talk to your health care provider about whether ferritin, GGT, or other testing is appropriate for you.

Support Your Skin Health Through Everyday Choices

Your skin reflects years of accumulated exposure, stress, and dietary choices. Sunspots act as warning lights instead of harmless cosmetic flaws because they reveal oxidative damage already happening beneath the surface. Lowering the factors linked to oxidative stress may support healthier skin as you age. Small actions performed consistently matter more than expensive treatments after the damage is already visible.

- 1. Lower your LA intake before worrying about cosmetic treatments** — Restaurant food, packaged snacks, salad dressings, and most baked goods are cooked in or made with seed oils, meaning if you eat out a few times a week or buy convenience foods, you're loading up on LA without realizing it. That stored fat reacts with sunlight and drives oxidative stress inside your skin cells.

Consider lowering daily LA intake below 5 grams, ideally near 2 grams, because reducing LA intake targets one factor researchers link to oxidative skin damage.

The Pax health platform includes Food Buddy and the Seed Oil Sleuth. This is a special feature designed to help identify hidden sources of LA in your diet, as well as estimate the total daily intake. Replace seed oils with more stable fats such as tallow, ghee, or grass fed butter. Avoid nuts, seeds, pork, and chicken because they also contain large amounts of LA.

- 2. Use sunlight strategically instead of fearing it** — Regular sun exposure supports cellular energy production, circadian rhythm function, and metabolic health. The primary concern may not be sunlight itself, but rather what happens when sunlight interacts with skin that has accumulated oxidized fats. If you recently removed seed oils from your diet, give your body time to lower stored LA before spending long hours in harsh midday sun.

I recommend morning and late afternoon sunlight first. If you spend time outdoors between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., build exposure gradually. After roughly six months off high-LA oils, your skin may become more resilient against burning and damage as LA levels in skin tissue decline.

3. Turn monthly skin checks into a routine you actually stick with — Pick one day every month and make it your skin-check day. Use a mirror and examine your face, scalp, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, and back. If you live alone, use a handheld mirror or your phone camera for hard-to-see areas. Look for changes in shape, color, texture, or size. Track anything suspicious with photos so you notice subtle differences over time.

4. Lower excess iron before it accelerates oxidative damage — High iron levels intensify oxidation inside your tissues, especially when combined with years of LA exposure. If your ferritin runs high, your skin pays the price through accelerated aging and dark pigment buildup. Ferritin and GGT blood tests give you measurable feedback instead of vague guesses about oxidative stress.

If your ferritin sits above the ideal range of 60 to 75 ng/mL, regular blood donation removes excess iron naturally. Many people notice improvements in energy and overall vitality once they lower iron overload because less oxidative stress affects the entire body, not just the skin.

5. Take fast action when a spot starts changing — One of the biggest mistakes people make is assuming every dark spot is harmless because it resembles an ordinary age spot. If a mark starts growing, crusting, itching, bleeding, or changing colors, don't wait around hoping it disappears on its own.

Early detection keeps small problems from turning into invasive diseases. Your skin constantly gives you feedback. The faster you respond to warning signs, the easier it becomes to protect both your appearance and your long-term health.

FAQs About Sunspots and Skin Cancer

Q: How do I tell the difference between a sunspot and skin cancer?

A: Sunspots usually stay flat, evenly colored, and stable over time. Skin cancer behaves differently. Dangerous lesions often grow, change shape, bleed, crust over, or develop uneven colors. Melanoma frequently follows the ABCDE rule: asymmetry, irregular borders, uneven color, larger diameter, and evolution over time. If a spot starts changing instead of staying consistent, your skin is signaling that something is wrong.

Q: Are sunspots dangerous or just cosmetic?

A: Sunspots themselves are usually harmless, but they reveal years of accumulated oxidative stress and sun damage. Many contain lipofuscin, a waste material that research suggests may form when LA from seed oils oxidizes in the presence of excess iron and UV light. In other words, these spots reflect deeper metabolic and cellular damage happening beneath the surface.

Q: Why do seed oils affect sun damage and skin aging?

A: Seed oils contain large amounts of LA, an unstable fat that accumulates in your tissues over time. When sunlight reaches skin loaded with these fats, researchers believe oxidative reactions can damage cells and contribute to visible aging. This process contributes to lipofuscin buildup, dark pigmentation, and greater vulnerability to skin damage. Lowering your intake of ultraprocessed foods and seed oils reduces that burden.

Q: What blood tests help identify oxidative stress linked to sunspots?

A: Ferritin and GGT blood tests provide useful clues. Ferritin measures stored iron levels, while GGT may reflect oxidative stress and free iron activity. Elevated iron may intensify oxidative damage throughout your body, including your skin. Tracking

these markers gives you measurable feedback instead of relying only on visible symptoms.

Q: How often should I check my skin for warning signs?

A: A monthly skin check works best for most people. Use a mirror to examine your face, scalp, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, back, and other hard-to-see areas. Look for spots that grow, itch, bleed, crust over, or change color or texture. Taking photos helps you track subtle changes over time, so dangerous lesions stand out earlier instead of blending into normal aging.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified health care provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

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