HOME

A Simple Coin Trick Could Help You Spot Changes in a Suspicious Mole—Dermatologists Explain Why

By bestfolkmedicine · 01/11/2026 · 10 min read



What if an ordinary coin and your smartphone could help you keep track of an important change in your skin?

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It sounds like another unusual internet health trick, but this simple technique has a legitimate place in dermatology.

The American Academy of Dermatology recommends placing a coin, pencil eraser, or ruler next to a skin spot when taking a close-up photograph for a dermatologist.

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Why? Because a familiar object provides a visual reference for size, making it easier to understand how large a mole or skin lesion appears in a photograph.

This can be especially helpful when documenting changes in a mole's appearance over time.

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However, there is one crucial detail everyone should understand.

A coin cannot diagnose skin cancer, determine whether a mole is dangerous, or replace a professional skin examination.

Its purpose is much simpler: helping you document what you see so that important information can be shared with a dermatologist.

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Here is how this unusual but practical technique works and why monitoring changes in your skin matters.

Why Dermatologists Recommend Photographing Moles

Most people have at least a few moles on their skin.

These small, pigmented spots are usually harmless and may appear on the face, arms, legs, back, or other parts of the body.

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Some people have only a handful, while others develop dozens throughout their lives.

Many ordinary moles remain relatively stable for years.

However, changes in a mole's size, shape, color, or texture can occasionally indicate a medical problem requiring further investigation.

One condition dermatologists are particularly concerned about is melanoma, a potentially serious type of skin cancer.

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Melanoma may develop in an existing mole or appear as a new, unusual-looking spot.

Recognizing suspicious changes and seeking medical evaluation promptly can improve the chances of detecting skin cancer at an earlier, more treatable stage.

This is where photographs can become useful.

A clear photograph creates a visual record that may help patients and healthcare professionals compare a skin lesion's appearance over time.

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The Coin Trick: How Does It Actually Work?

The technique is straightforward.

Instead of photographing a mole by itself, place a clean coin beside it before taking the picture.

The coin acts as a reference object.

Because the approximate size of common coins is known, the object provides helpful context about the dimensions of the skin spot.

For example, a tiny mole photographed with a phone's zoom function may appear much larger than it actually is.

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Without anything nearby to show scale, judging its real size from the photograph can be difficult.

Including a coin helps establish perspective.

The American Academy of Dermatology specifically mentions coins as one possible size reference when taking close-up photographs of skin concerns.

Other objects, including a ruler or pencil eraser, can also be used.

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A millimeter ruler is generally more useful when precise size measurements are needed.

The goal is not to identify cancer through the coin itself.

It is to produce a clearer, more informative photograph.

How to Use the Coin Trick Correctly

If you want to document an existing mole or skin spot, follow these simple steps.

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Step 1: Choose Good Lighting

Natural daylight near a window is often ideal.

Good lighting allows the camera to capture the color, borders, and surface characteristics of the skin.

Avoid strong shadows, harsh reflections, and colored artificial lighting that may distort the appearance of the mole.

Step 2: Place a Coin Beside the Mole

Choose a clean coin with a recognizable size.

Place it gently next to the mole without covering any part of the spot.

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Do not press, scrape, rub, or irritate the skin.

The coin should be positioned on approximately the same plane as the skin lesion to provide a meaningful size reference.

If the skin is curved or difficult to photograph, a small ruler may work better.

Step 3: Take a Clear Close-Up Photograph

Use your smartphone camera to capture the mole and the surrounding skin.

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Make sure the image is sharp and not blurry.

Turn off beauty filters, automatic skin-smoothing effects, and other settings that may alter the appearance of the spot.

Avoid editing the photo afterward.

Step 4: Capture the Surrounding Area

A close-up photograph is helpful, but it is not the only image worth taking.

The American Academy of Dermatology recommends capturing different perspectives.

An overview photograph can show where the spot is located on your body.

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A comparison photograph can show the surrounding skin.

A close-up photograph can provide details about the lesion itself.

Together, these images give a dermatologist more useful information than a single heavily zoomed photograph.

Step 5: Record the Date

Save the original photograph with the date it was taken.

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If you already have earlier images, they may help show whether changes have occurred.

However, do not delay medical evaluation just to collect additional photographs.

A mole that already looks suspicious should be examined promptly.

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The 5 Warning Signs Dermatologists Want You to Know

Monitoring skin changes becomes more useful when you understand what to look for.

Dermatologists commonly recommend the ABCDE rule when evaluating potentially suspicious pigmented lesions.

This system describes five important characteristics associated with melanoma.

A — Asymmetry

One half of a mole looks noticeably different from the other half.

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Many ordinary moles have relatively symmetrical shapes, although not every harmless mole is perfectly symmetrical.

A clearly asymmetric appearance can be a warning sign.

B — Border

The edges of a mole appear irregular, jagged, blurred, or poorly defined.

A typical benign mole often has a more uniform border.

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Changes in the border deserve attention, particularly when they occur alongside other suspicious features.

C — Color

A mole contains several different colors or develops noticeable variations in pigmentation.

Concerning changes may involve combinations of brown, black, red, pink, white, or blue.

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A mole that becomes darker, develops a new color, or loses pigment in an unusual pattern may require evaluation.

D — Diameter

Melanomas are often larger than approximately 6 millimeters when diagnosed.

However, this is not a minimum size for skin cancer.

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Melanoma can be smaller than 6 millimeters, so a small spot should never be assumed harmless based on its diameter alone.

E — Evolving

This is one of the most important warning signs.

A mole that changes in size, shape, color, elevation, or other characteristics may need medical evaluation.

New itching, bleeding, tenderness, or crusting can also be concerning.

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The ABCDE system is a useful awareness tool, but it cannot diagnose or exclude melanoma.

Why Tracking Changes Can Matter

One reason suspicious skin lesions are sometimes overlooked is that changes may occur gradually.

Someone who sees the same mole every day might not immediately notice that its appearance has changed.

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Photographs can provide a reference point.

For example, a person may remember having a particular mole for years but be uncertain whether it has recently become wider.

An earlier photograph may help clarify whether there has been a noticeable change.

Similarly, a new darker area or irregular border might be easier to recognize when comparing images.

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This does not mean smartphone photography is a reliable diagnostic test on its own.

Differences in lighting, camera angle, focus, and distance can make the same mole appear different between photographs.

That is why consistent photographic technique matters, and why professional assessment remains necessary whenever a lesion looks suspicious.

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Can a Coin Actually Help Detect Skin Cancer?

The answer requires an important distinction.

A coin can help document a mole's apparent size in a photograph.

That documentation may support conversations with a dermatologist and help illustrate changes.

However, there is no evidence that placing a coin next to a mole independently detects melanoma or reduces skin cancer risk.

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The coin does not analyze the mole, reveal cancer cells, or determine whether a lesion is benign or malignant.

It is simply a visual reference.

Dermatologists use specialized training and examination techniques to assess suspicious skin lesions.

They may use a dermatoscope, a medical device that magnifies the skin and reveals structures that are difficult to evaluate with the naked eye.

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When necessary, a biopsy can establish whether a suspicious lesion contains cancer cells.

No ordinary household object can replace these diagnostic methods.

What If a Mole Looks Different From All the Others?

Another important warning sign is sometimes called the ugly duckling sign.

This refers to a mole or spot that looks noticeably different from a person's other moles.

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For example, someone may have several small, uniformly brown moles but notice one lesion that is unusually dark, irregular, or changing.

That difference may warrant closer examination.

Skin cancers do not always follow every characteristic described by the ABCDE rule.

Some melanomas may appear as unusual pink or skin-colored lesions rather than dark brown or black moles.

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Others may develop beneath nails, on the palms, or on the soles of the feet.

This is why evaluating the entire skin surface and paying attention to new or unusual growths is important.

When Should You See a Dermatologist?

A professional skin examination is appropriate if you notice a mole or skin spot that:

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- Changes in size, shape, or color.
- Develops irregular or poorly defined borders.
- Begins bleeding without an obvious injury.
- Becomes persistently itchy, painful, or tender.
- Looks noticeably different from your other moles.
- Appears as a new, unusual, or growing lesion.
- Develops into a sore that does not heal.

These signs do not necessarily mean cancer is present.

Many harmless skin conditions can produce similar symptoms.

Nevertheless, suspicious changes deserve timely assessment rather than repeated home monitoring.

A photograph can be helpful information to bring to an appointment, but it should never be used as a reason to postpone medical care.

What About Smartphone Apps That Analyze Moles?

Artificial intelligence and smartphone technology are increasingly being explored in dermatology.

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Some applications claim to analyze photographs of skin lesions and estimate whether they appear suspicious.

However, consumer skin-analysis apps vary considerably in quality, clinical validation, and regulatory oversight.

A reassuring result from an app does not reliably exclude melanoma.

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Likewise, an alarming result does not automatically establish that a mole is cancerous.

These technologies should not replace an examination by a qualified medical professional.

For people concerned about changing skin spots, documenting the lesion and arranging appropriate medical evaluation remains a more dependable approach than relying on an unverified automated assessment.

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How Often Should You Check Your Skin?

There is no single self-examination schedule that is appropriate for everyone.

People with a personal history of skin cancer, numerous atypical moles, significant sun damage, or other risk factors may require individualized monitoring.

A dermatologist can recommend an appropriate schedule based on personal risk.

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Becoming familiar with the usual appearance of your skin may help you notice unusual changes.

Pay attention to areas that are easy to overlook, including the scalp, back, feet, spaces between the toes, and beneath the nails.

If you notice a suspicious change, do not wait for a routine self-check date before seeking medical advice.

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Does the Type of Coin Matter?

No special coin is necessary.

A penny, nickel, euro coin, or another recognizable coin can provide a visual reference.

However, different coins have different diameters, so the coin's identity matters when interpreting scale.

When possible, using a millimeter ruler is preferable because its markings provide more precise size information.

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The material of the coin is irrelevant.

Copper, nickel, and other metals do not provide any special diagnostic effect when placed beside a mole.

This technique works because the object provides a measurement reference, not because of the metal itself.

The Bottom Line: A Simple Object With a Practical Purpose

Sometimes, the most useful health habits do not require expensive equipment.

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A smartphone, good lighting, and a familiar object such as a coin can help create clearer photographs of skin changes.

The American Academy of Dermatology recognizes the usefulness of placing a coin or ruler next to a skin spot when taking photographs for medical assessment.

That recommendation provides a legitimate scientific basis for this simple technique.

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But its purpose must be understood correctly.

The coin does not detect skin cancer. It helps document what a mole looks like so that changes can be communicated more clearly to a dermatologist.

Learning the ABCDE warning signs, paying attention to unusual skin changes, and obtaining timely medical evaluation are far more important than the coin itself.

The next time you notice a mole that concerns you, a well-taken photograph may be useful.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(165); });
Just remember that documenting a suspicious spot is not the same as having it medically examined.

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