

# Exclamation Points



Ultra-common yet largely unsung, moles haven't garnered the same aesthetic appreciation as their little cousin, freckles. But as cultural definitions of beauty become more inclusive and individualistic, they're finally making a mark.

BY ANNIE TOMLIN

PHOTO: JEREMY LANE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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or thousands of years, humans have read meaning into moles. In ancient China and Greece, fortune-tellers divined futures by reading birthmarks.

(One on your forehead? You're a power player! Is it on the back of your neck? Oh, sorry, you're going to be beheaded.) In seventeenth-century England and France, women fashioned faux moles from taffeta or leather. On the other side of the Atlantic, Salem witch hunters decreed that moles were the work of the devil. (Clearly, it was preferable to be a Frenchwoman in those days.)

As divisive as moles have been, they're far from exceptional. Nearly every adult has some. They're more common among fair-skinned folks, but they pop up on all complexions. When we're born, they're microscopic, and they begin to grow during childhood. That's usually when people start to disagree on what, exactly, to make of them.

Their admirers refer to them as beauty marks, even accentuating or painting them. Meanwhile, detractors buy extra-strength concealer and search the Internet in private browsing mode for home-removal tips.

Now, as American culture moves away from a one-size-fits-all definition of beauty, there are encouraging signs that moles are getting their due. Whenever a magazine cover or an ad campaign digitally erases the smattering of moles on übermodel Gigi Hadid's (enviably defined) abs, for example, her fans unleash a tweetstorm in praise of her unretouched beauty. "Moles make us unique. We all have them—just in different places," says NYC dermatologist and psychiatrist Amy Wechsler, M.D. Here's to their randomness, their quirks, and their character-giving superpowers.



## Identity Crisis

"Not every brown spot is a mole," says Ellen Marmor, M.D., a dermatologist in New York City. So how can you tell what kind of mark is on your skin? Technically speaking, moles are called nevi and can be flat, raised, flesh-colored, brown, or black. On a microscopic level, they're a tight cluster of melanocytes, the body's pigment-making cells. Freckles, too, are groupings of melanocytes, but "freckles often tend to come and go with sun exposure," says Los Angeles dermatologist Naissan Wesley, M.D. "Moles grow deeper in the skin. They come—and they stay." And then there's seborrheic keratosis, an age-related brown or gray growth commonly mistaken for a mole. These growths are benign and frequently removed for cosmetic reasons, but still, Marmor advises having any new moles or other spots examined. "I've taken off a few that mimicked early seborrheic keratosis but later turned out to be thin melanomas."

## A Brief History of Hot Spots

Because we were transfixed by these things before Cindy, and we certainly were after...



1929

Cinematic it girl **Clara Bow** stars in this year's *The Wild Party* sporting a drawn-on mole shaped like a heart.



1953

**Marilyn Monroe** skyrockets to fame in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, enthraling audiences with her platinum hair and left-cheek mole.



1955

Trailblazing African American actress **Dorothy Dandridge** refers to the three moles on her face as "touches of cosmetic art."



1963

**Elizabeth Taylor** stars in *Cleopatra*. No word on whether the historical queen shared Taylor's much-admired beauty mark.



1965

**Edie Sedgwick** becomes a style icon and darling of the art scene, thanks to her cropped, bleached hair, graphic eyeliner, and mole.

FROM TOP: JAMES BEY/ISTOCK; MARY JOHNS/ISTOCK; UNREDACTED; ALAMY; PHOTOFEST; GETTY IMAGES; GARY WOODS/ISTOCK; ISTOCK

SPRING BEAUTY SPECIAL

Handle with Care

Most people sport at least a few normal moles (even-colored, round or oval, and smaller than one-quarter inch). Simply having them doesn't make you more prone to skin cancer. But if you've got more than five of the dysplastic—or irregular—kind, your risk of developing melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, increases tenfold. No matter your situation, though, your best defense is a good offense: wearing broad-spectrum sunscreen (with an SPF of at least 30) daily. On days you'll be outdoors, re-up every hour; when you're stuck in an office, Wechsler says it's okay to apply sunscreen only when you're headed outside. A nonannoying strategy for when you're running around but don't feel like toting bottles of SPF? In the morning, apply a base for your face, like Supergoop! Unseen Sunscreen SPF 40 (\$32, supergoop.com) and one for your body, like Neutrogena Hydro Boost Water Gel Lotion SPF 50 (\$12.49, at drugstores).



Then keep a mist, such as Coola Face SPF 30 Makeup Setting Spray (\$36, sephora.com), handy for touch-ups throughout the day on any exposed skin. It's

gentle enough for the face, but the broad-spectrum SPF 30 means it can dole out protection wherever you need it, whether on your nose or your knees.

Keep Watch

Everyone should have a yearly skin cancer check with their dermatologist, but in addition, "you should definitely look at your own moles every month," says Marmur. Just remember your ABCDEs:

- Asymmetry** Healthy moles are symmetrical. Got one resembling the shape of Iceland? Get it seen ASAP.
- Border** A mole's edges should be smooth and defined—not jagged, blurry, or uneven.
- Color** Most moles are a single shade of brown. A black spot, or multiple colors in one nevus, require an M.D. check.
- Diameter** Anything larger than six millimeters (about the size of a pencil eraser) should be examined.
- Elevation** Flat moles should stay flat. If one rises, ZocDoc your dermatologist.

Shade Shift

Healthy moles don't change their hue, with one exception. "During pregnancy, when estrogen levels are high for a prolonged period of time, your existing moles can get darker," says Wechsler. That's because estrogen increases melanin production (moles should return to baseline after you give birth). Research suggests that the synthetic version of estrogen used in birth control pills has a similar effect—so theoretically, a contraception/self-tanner pill could exist in the distant future.



**1982** Gaming geeks flock to play **Ms. Pac-Man**, whose glam look features a hair bow, red lipstick, and a dainty dot on her left cheek.



**1983** Teenage **Cindy Crawford** wins a modeling contest—thanks, in part, to a mole she'd originally wanted to remove.



**2006** As **Amy Winehouse** belts out hits on *Back to Black*, she shows off a studded "beauty mark"—a Monroe, in piercing parlance—on her upper lip.



**2011** A Twitter account begins tracking the random placement of singer **Kelly Rowland's** mole. Surprise! It's made from a dab of black Duo eyelash glue.



**2016** Insta-fans of **Gigi Hadid** protest the absence of her torso moles on magazine covers. "Did they erase her beauty marks?" one asks. ■

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