



Actor and melanoma patient Damian Thompson (l.) has his scar from a mole that was surgically removed examined by Dr. Hooman Khorasani, chief of Mount Sinai Hospital's division of Mohs, Reconstructive, and Cosmetic Surgery. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Harlem actor Damian Thompson didn't think much about the mole on his thigh, even though friends urged him to get it checked out, saying it might be skin cancer.

"For me, it was like, it's not a big deal, it's just not common for us," said Thompson, 34, who is black and grew up in Jamaica.

Only one in 1,000 black people will get melanoma in their lifetime, compared with one in 50 whites, according to the American Cancer Society. But Thompson's case shows it's important for everyone to be aware, said his doctor.

When his biopsy came back positive for cancer last fall, Thompson was able to get surgery before it spread.

"If it's caught early, the actual prognosis is really good," said Dr. Hooman Khorasani, chief of Mount Sinai Hospital's division of Mohs, Reconstructive, and Cosmetic Surgery, who operated on Thompson.

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Malignant melanoma is the fastest-growing cancer for men, and the second-fastest for women — but if it is detected and treated before it spreads to the lymph nodes, the five-year survival rate is 98%, according to the ACS.



When his biopsy came back positive for cancer last fall, Thompson was able to get surgery before it spread, and he and his doctor recommend getting checked early.

Skin cancer cases have been on the rise over the past three decades, and 9,940 people are expected to die from melanoma this year, according to the ACS.

"It's definitely on the rise. It's a public health issue," said Khorasani.

Thompson actually hadn't planned on going to the doctor about his mole, but when he ended up at the dermatologist office after breaking out in stress-induced hives, he decided it was time to ask about it.

Because it looked irregular, the dermatologist ordered tests.

Thompson cried when he heard the results — but quickly set up an appointment with Khorasani.



Thompson didn't think much about the mole on his thigh, even though friends urged him to get it checked out, and it turned out to be melanoma.

"I'm glad I caught it early," Thompson said. "If I hadn't broken out in hives, I would have never gone to a dermatologist."

Thompson's case is even more rare because the form of melanoma that black people generally develop is called acral lentiginous melanoma — which shows up under the fingernails and on the bottom of the foot.

It's the same condition that proved fatal to reggae king Bob Marley, who died at 36 in 1981.

Thompson is now urging his family members to see a dermatologist if they see anything suspicious.

"In our culture, it's just something that's not talked about at all," Thompson said. "Now I'm aware."

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