

ATYPICAL BLUE NEVUS/MALIGNANT BLUE NEVUS/ANIMAL TYPE MELANOMA: WHAT IS WHAT?

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The so-called 'gray zone' in the diagnosis of melanocytic skin lesions was introduced by Kim and Murphy in 2000. It means that each group of the huge family of pigmented lesions collects neoplasms ranging from overtly benign to overtly malignant with lesions showing 'conflicting' features in between. The term 'malignant blue nevus' is improper but highly informative, because it designates a malignant neoplasm whose morphology recalls a benign counterpart. Indeed, the category of malignant blue nevus encompasses several different entities. The fully malignant end of this morphologic spectrum is animal-type melanoma. Another entity we can call malignant blue nevus is a morphologic clone of melanoma arising in an otherwise typical cellular blue nevus. Finally, we can have blue nevus-like metastatic melanoma, which is a tricky malignancy. Cytologic atypia, lymphoid nodules, abundance of melanophages are the key features.

Animal type melanoma, melanoma ex blue nevus, and blue nevus-like metastatic melanoma must be excluded from the concept of atypical blue nevus. Cerroni et al. collected 57 cases of melanocytic tumors of uncertain malignant potential (MELTUMP) and divided the cases into favourable, intermediate, and unfavourable categories. Compared with atypical Spitz tumors, 'atypical blue' tumors were more frequently associated with an unfavourable behaviour but their prognosis seemed to be better than a conventional melanoma of great thickness. No microscopic feature allowed differentiation among the different prognostic categories, except for mitoses and mitoses close to the base. This probably means that these lesions are low-grade malignancies, somewhat in between nevus and melanoma. They are melanocytomas. Morphologically intermediate forms between Spitz and blue tumors designate a 'spectrum' of epithelioid and dendritic cell proliferations. These range from banal combined nevi to overtly malignant lesions, with intermediate lesions in between.