

Skin Cancers

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Skin cancer is the most prevalent of all types of human cancers. Fair-skinned people who sunburn easily are at a particularly high risk for developing skin cancer.

Other less important factors include repeated medical and industrial X-ray exposure, scarring from diseases or burns, occupational exposure to compounds such as coal tar and arsenic, and family history of skin cancer.

Actinic Keratoses (AK): The Earliest Skin Cancer

Actinic keratoses are considered the earliest stage in the development of skin cancer. Proper use of sunscreens can help prevent actinic keratoses even after extensive sun damage has already occurred.

Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC)

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer and appears frequently on the head, neck, and hands as a small, fleshy bump. Other parts of the body may be affected as well.

Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC)

Squamous cell carcinoma is the second most common skin cancer; it is primarily found in fair-skinned people and rarely in dark-skinned individuals.

Malignant Melanoma (MM)

Malignant melanoma is the most destructive of all skin cancers. Melanoma is less common than other skin cancers. However, it is much more dangerous and causes the majority (75%) of deaths related to skin cancer.

Warning signs of melanoma include:

- Changes in the surface of a mole.

- Scaling, oozing, bleeding, or the appearance of a new bump.
- Spread of pigment from the border of a mole into surrounding skin.
- Change in sensation including itchiness, tenderness, or pain.

The ABCDEs of Melanoma: when to worry about moles

Asymmetry - One-half doesn't match the other half in size, shape, color, or thickness.

Border irregularity - The edges are ragged, scalloped, or poorly defined.

Color - The pigmentation is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown, and black are present. Dashes of red, white, and blue add to the mottled appearance.

Diameter - While melanomas are usually greater than 6mm in diameter (the size of a pencil eraser) when diagnosed, they can be smaller. If you notice a mole different from others, or which changes, itches, or bleeds (even if it is small), you should see a dermatologist.

Evolution - The most important alerting sign is evolution or change in moles

Treatment of Skin Cancer

If a skin biopsy reveals cancer, the dermatologist has an array of medical and surgical procedures as treatment, depending upon the type of cancer, its location, and the needs of the individual.

Dermatologic surgical treatments include electrodesiccation and curettage (ED&C) that involves alternately scraping or burning the tumor in combination with low levels of electricity, surgical excision, cryosurgery (freezing using liquid nitrogen), and Mohs micrographic surgery. Other dermatologic treatments include radiation therapy and topical chemotherapy.

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Skin Cancers CONT'D

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Early Detection is the Surest Way to a Cure

Develop a regular routine to inspect your body for any skin changes. If a growth, mole, sore, or skin discoloration appears suddenly, or begins to change, see a dermatologist. It is wise to have an annual skin examination by a dermatologist, especially for adults with lots of moles, significant past sun exposure or a family history of skin cancer.

The Best Defense - Sun Avoidance

Overexposure to ultraviolet light (sunlight or tanning lamps), especially if it results in sunburn and blistering, is the main cause of skin cancer. Seek shade if possible between 10 am - 4 pm when the sun's rays are most intense. Wear light-colored, tightly-woven, protective clothing like long sleeves and pants, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses. Wear a sunscreen with both UVA & UVB protection, ideally with an SPF of 30 or more. Reapply sunscreen every 2-3 hours when in the sun and always after sweating or water exposure. ■

