

Skin Cancer

Skin cancer — the abnormal growth of skin cells — is the most common form of cancer diagnosed. Doctors diagnose skin cancer in approximately 1 million Americans each year, and about 9,800 Americans die annually of skin cancer.

The three major types of skin cancer are basal cell, squamous cell, and melanoma. Basal cell and squamous cell are the most common and comprise the large majority of cases of non-melanoma skin cancer. Both are superficial, slow growing and highly treatable, especially if found early. Melanoma is a more serious form of skin cancer. It affects deeper layers of the skin and has the greatest potential to spread to other tissues in your body.

All three types of skin cancer are on the rise. Fair-skinned people who live in areas with a lot of sunshine are at greatest risk. But anyone can develop skin cancer, which is most commonly caused by over-exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun.

The good news is that most skin cancers are preventable by limiting or avoiding exposure to UV radiation and by detecting changes in your skin at an early stage. If caught early, most skin cancers are highly treatable. For these reasons, it's important to protect your skin from the sun and to check your skin regularly for signs of skin cancer.

Signs and symptoms

A change on your skin is the most common warning sign of skin cancer. Skin cancer may appear as a small growth or as a sore that bleeds, crusts over, heals and then reopens. The first sign of melanoma may be a change in an existing mole or the development of a new, suspicious-looking mole.

Skin cancer develops mainly on areas of skin exposed to a lot of sun, including your scalp, face, lips, ears, neck, chest, arms and hands, and on the legs in women. But skin cancer can also develop on unexposed areas, such as your palms, the spaces between toes and your genital area. A cancerous skin lesion can appear suddenly, or it can develop slowly.

Although skin cancers don't all look the same, they all involve a change in the skin's appearance in a localized area. If you notice any suspicious change in your skin, consult your doctor right away. As with most cancers, early detection increases the chances of successful treatment. Don't wait for the area to start hurting — skin cancer seldom causes pain.

The signs and symptoms of the three most common types of skin cancer are as follows:

Basal cell cancer

- A pearly or waxy bump on your face, ears or neck
- A flat, flesh-colored or brown scar-like lesion on your chest or back

Squamous cell cancer

- A firm, red nodule on your face, lips, ears, neck, hands or arms
- A flat lesion with a scaly, crusted surface on your face, ears, neck, hands or arms

Melanoma

- A large brownish spot with darker speckles, anywhere on your body
- A simple mole anywhere on your body that changes in color or size or consistency or that bleeds
- A small lesion with an irregular border and red, white, blue or blue-black spots on your trunk or limbs
- Shiny, firm, dome-shaped bumps anywhere on your body
- Dark lesions on your palms, soles, fingertips and toes, or on mucous membranes — skin that lines your mouth, nose, vagina and anus

Precancerous skin lesions, such as an actinic keratosis, also can develop into skin cancer. Actinic keratoses appear as rough, scaly, brown-to-dark-pink patches. They're most commonly found on your face, ears, lower arms and hands of fair-skinned people whose skin has been damaged by the sun.

Treatments vary for skin cancers and precancerous skin lesions. Treatments depend on the size, type, depth and location of a lesion or lesions. Most treatments use a local anesthetic and can be performed in an outpatient setting. Sometimes no treatment is necessary beyond

an initial biopsy that removes the entire growth. If additional treatment is necessary, your options include:

- Freezing with liquid nitrogen. The dead tissue sloughs off when it thaws. The treatment may leave a small, white scar. You may also need a repeat treatment to remove the growth completely.
- Excisional surgery. This type of treatment may be appropriate for any type of skin cancer. Your doctor cuts out the cancerous tissue and a surrounding margin of healthy skin. A wide excision — taking out extra normal skin around the tumor — may be best for melanoma. To minimize or avoid scarring, especially on your face, you may need to go to a doctor skilled in skin reconstruction.
- Laser therapy. A precise, intense beam of light vaporizes growths, generally with little damage to surrounding tissue and with minimal bleeding, swelling and scarring. A doctor may use this therapy to treat superficial skin cancers or precancerous growths on lips.
- Mohs' surgery. This procedure is for larger, recurring or difficult-to-treat skin cancers, which may include both basal cell and squamous cell cancers. The growth is removed layer by layer, examining each layer under the microscope, until no abnormal cells remain. This treatment is most able to remove skin cancer without taking an excessive amount of surrounding healthy skin.
- Curettage and electrodesiccation. After removing most of a growth, layers of cancer cells are removed using a circular blade. An electric

needle destroys any remaining cancer cells. This simple, quick procedure is common in treating small or thin basal cell cancers.

- Radiation therapy. Radiation may destroy basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers if surgery isn't an option.
- Chemotherapy. In chemotherapy, drugs are used to kill cancer cells. With skin cancer, chemotherapy can be delivered topically by applying creams or lotions containing anti-cancer agents to the skin. This treatment is useful for cancers limited to the top layer of the skin.

How To Avoid Cancer

- Limit your time in the sun.
- Use sunscreen.
- Avoid tanning beds and tan-accelerating agents.
- Check your skin regularly and report changes to your doctor.

Love Canal Medical Fund Contact Information:

If you have any questions about cancer or whether your illness is covered by the fund, please let us know using e-mail, the telephone, or the U.S. postal system. Our e-mail address is lcmf@adelphia.net and our phone number is 716-773-6578. Please leave a message and we'll make sure that your call receives a quick response. Or write us at Love Canal Medical Fund, P.O. Box 540, Grand Island, NY 14072

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