

About Skin Cancer (non melanoma) - A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of the information on 'About skin cancer (non melanoma)' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

If you are looking for information about the skin cancer that develops from abnormal moles (melanoma) this is not the right information for you.

In this information there are sections on

- The skin
- Skin cancer risks and causes
- Preventing skin cancer
- Skin cancer screening
- Skin cancer symptoms
- Types of skin cancer
- Should I see a skin cancer specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

The skin

The skin is really another body organ. It does several important jobs such as being a barrier and protecting everything inside your body. The skin is made up of two main layers. The epidermis on the outside and the dermis underneath. New cells are made in the deep layers of the epidermis and are pushed towards the surface. The surface layers of the skin are made up of

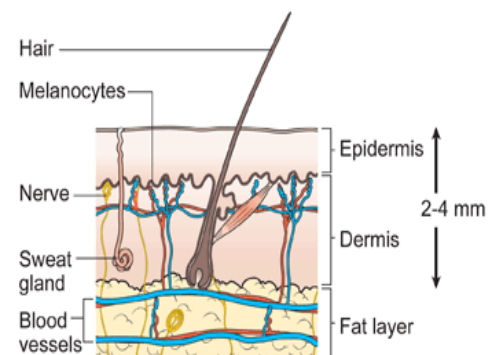


Diagram showing the structure of the skin
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cells that have died and become filled with a substance called keratin. Keratin is a tough waxy substance that helps to make the skin strong enough to protect the body.

Skin cells and cancer

There are several different types of non melanoma skin cancer. The most common types are basal cell cancer and squamous cell cancer. Basal cells are the cells found at the bottom of the epidermis. These are the cells that all the normal skin cells above come from. They are also the cells that basal cell skin cancers can develop from. Basal cell cancer is the most common type of skin cancer. The cells that make keratin are called keratinocytes. It is these cells that can develop into squamous cell skin cancer.



In the deeper layers of the epidermis are cells called melanocytes. Melanocytes make melanin. Melanin is a brown substance. It helps to protect your skin from the harmful rays of the sun. It is these cells that become cancerous in melanoma.

Skin cancers can be slow growing and it can take some years before a cancer is noticed. But sometimes a skin cancer can grow very quickly – within a few months.

Skin cancer risks and causes

Non melanoma skin cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in the UK each year. It is one of the few cancers where we know the cause of most cases.

Skin cancer and the sun

Most skin cancers are caused by long term exposure to the sun. There are two types of non melanoma skin cancer, basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). A history of sunburn increases the risk of BCC. Risk is especially high if you had several episodes of sunburn in childhood. The risk of SCC is linked to overall sun exposure through your life. This means that outdoor workers have an increased risk - for example, farm workers, gardeners and building site workers. Sunburn in childhood is also linked to SCC in some studies.

Fair skinned people, with light coloured hair and eyes, or those more likely to burn than tan, are more at risk of sun damage than dark skinned people.

Other risk factors

You have a higher risk of skin cancer if you are older or have had skin cancer before. Having a family history of skin cancer also

increases risk. Other factors include having had certain other skin conditions or previous radiotherapy, having been exposed to certain chemicals and having a weakened immune system.

Preventing skin cancer

Some SunSmart advice

Sunburn can double your risk of skin cancer. Sunbeds are not a safe alternative to tanning outdoors. It is important to avoid the sun is at its most intense. Remember to

- Spend time in the shade between 11 and 3
- Make sure you never burn
- Aim to cover up with T shirt, hat and sunglasses
- Remember to take extra care with children
- Then use factor 15+ sunscreen

Checking for skin cancers

It is also important that you make a habit of checking your own skin. If you find any new abnormalities on the skin that don't go away after 4 to 6 weeks or existing ones that are getting bigger you should get your GP to look at them. This is especially important if you are at a high risk of getting skin cancer or have had treatment for a previous skin cancer.

Skin cancer screening

Screening means testing people for early stages of a disease before they have any symptoms. At the moment there is no general screening programme in the UK for non melanoma skin cancer. If there were a screening programme, it would take up a great deal of time and money. It could be argued that it does not make sense to



spend such a lot on picking up cancers that are slow growing and nearly always curable. Non melanoma skin cancers are most common on areas exposed to the most sun, and so patients or their close friends or relatives usually spot them in plenty of time to have successful treatment.

Skin cancer symptoms

Non melanoma skin cancer occurs most often on skin that is exposed to the sun. The symptoms of non melanoma skin cancer may be similar to symptoms of other non cancerous skin conditions. You should show your GP any area of skin that is damaged and does not heal up.

Skin cancers can appear as

- A spot or sore that does not heal within 4 weeks
- A spot or sore that continues to itch, hurt, scab, crust or bleed for more than 4 weeks
- Areas where the skin has broken down or forms an ulcer with no obvious cause, and does not heal within 4 weeks

Basal cell skin cancers look like a small, slow growing, shiny, pink or red lump. If left, they tend to become crusty, bleed or develop into an ulcer. They are commonest on the face, scalp, ears, hands, shoulders and back.

Squamous cell skin cancers are usually pink lumps. They may have hard or scaly skin on the surface. They can bleed easily and develop into an ulcer. They are most often found on the face, neck, lips, ears, hands, shoulders, arms and legs.

Bowen's disease is a very early form of skin cancer. It usually looks like a red patch and

may be itchy. It can appear anywhere on the body.

Types of skin cancer

Non melanoma skin cancer is different from melanoma. Melanoma is the type of skin cancer that most often develops from a mole. If you are looking for information on melanoma, go to the separate melanoma skin cancer section of CancerHelp UK.

There are two main types of non melanoma skin cancer. There are also several much rarer types.

Basal cell skin cancer

About 75 out of every 100 cases (75%) of non melanoma skin cancers diagnosed are this type. Basal cell skin cancer develops mostly in areas exposed to the sun, but can develop on your back or lower legs. It is most often diagnosed in middle or old age. It is very rare for a basal cell skin cancer to spread to another part of the body.

Squamous cell skin cancer

About 20 out of every 100 cases (20%) of skin cancers are this type. It usually develops in areas that have been exposed to the sun. If squamous cell cancer does spread, it is most often to the deeper layers of the skin. Occasionally, it can spread to nearby lymph nodes and other organs, causing secondary cancers.

Rare skin cancer types

Much less common types of non melanoma skin cancer are Merkel cell carcinoma, Kaposi's sarcoma and T cell lymphoma of the skin.



Should I see a skin cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much more minor. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) have produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which patients need to be seen urgently by a specialist.

The symptoms that need urgent referral for squamous cell skin cancer include

- A hard, broken area of skin that is bigger than 1 cm across, will not heal and has definitely grown in size in 8 weeks
- Patients whose GP has taken a biopsy of a skin lesion and it has been confirmed to be squamous cell skin cancer
- Any new abnormal appearances on the skin or existing ones that are getting bigger, in anyone who has had an organ transplant (which means you are at higher risk of skin cancer)

Basal cell skin cancers do not usually need an urgent referral. But if your GP suspects that you have a basal cell cancer then you should have a non urgent referral to a specialist.

If you are still worried

If you are concerned that your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think he or she should, you could print this page and take it along to an appointment.

What to ask your doctor about skin cancer

- How will I know if I have skin cancer?
- What are the signs of skin cancer?
- Am I more likely to get skin cancer than anyone else?
- What should I do to protect against skin cancer?
- My sister had skin cancer. Does that increase my risk?
- How do I check myself for skin cancer?
- How often should I check my skin?

More information

For more information about skin cancer, visit our website

<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040**
9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in June 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).