

Diagnosing Skin Cancer (non melanoma) - A Quick Guide



Contents

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

In this information there are sections on

- Tests for skin cancer
- Further tests for skin cancer
- Questions for your doctor

Tests for skin cancer

If you have an abnormal area of skin that you think might be a cancer, you will need to go to your GP. If your GP thinks you may have a skin cancer, the abnormal area will need to be tested.

Biopsies to test for skin cancer

The only way to definitely tell if you have a skin cancer or not is to take a sample of the skin and examine it under a microscope. This is called a biopsy. Usually this will be done under a local anaesthetic.

If you have a small skin cancer, you may have the biopsy at your GP surgery. If not, your GP will refer you to a dermatologist. Dermatologists are doctors who specialise in skin conditions.

There can be quite a long wait to see a dermatologist. This can be quite unsettling if you are worried that you may have cancer. But non melanoma skin cancer takes years to develop in most cases. Waiting a few weeks is unlikely to do any harm.

Sometimes a referral to a specialist is needed more urgently. 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.

When you have your biopsy, you will have an injection of local anaesthetic. The doctor will then cut out a sample of skin tissue and send it off to the laboratory so that it can be examined under a microscope.

You will get the results 2 to 3 weeks after the biopsy was done.

Further tests for skin cancer

Who needs further tests for skin cancer?

Most people with basal cell skin cancer or squamous cell skin cancer will not need these tests. They will only be done if your doctor thinks there is any chance that your cancer may have spread to nearby lymph nodes or to another part of the body. For



basal cell cancers, this is very unlikely. For squamous cell cancers, it is unlikely if they have been diagnosed early on.

Types of tests

You may be asked to have a chest X-ray, a CT scan an ultrasound or an MRI scan.

Sentinel lymph node biopsy

If your doctor thinks there is a possibility that your squamous cell cancer has spread to your lymph nodes, you may have this test.

After your tests

You will probably feel very anxious while waiting for your test results. It may help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about diagnosing skin cancer

- I have a funny red patch of skin and am worried it may be cancer. Can you remove it, or will I have to go to hospital?
- Do you often do this type of minor surgery?
- Will you take away a safety margin of healthy tissue around the suspicious skin?
- Should I be referred to a dermatologist?
- What is the waiting list to see a dermatologist at my local hospital?

- Will I need stitches?
- What will happen if I don't have this removed?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the results?
- Am I likely to need any more treatment?
- Will I need to have any tests?
- Will I have to come for follow up appointments?
- Am I likely to get another skin cancer, now I have had one?
- What should I look for?
- Are any of my family at increased risk?

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).