

SKIN CANCERS

PATIENT INFORMATION & INSTRUCTIONS

SKIN CANCERS: WHY ITS IMPORTANT AND WHAT TO DO

Skin cancer is a serious disease that can affect anyone at any age. It's the most common kind of cancer in the U.S. Most can often be cured. But some types of skin cancer can be life-threatening. Talk with your healthcare provider about what you can do to help prevent skin cancer. Ask about regular skin exams as part of your routine physicals. You can also ask about doing monthly self-exams of your skin.

You can help find cancer early by checking your skin each month. Doing monthly self skin examinations is the best way to find new marks, sores, or skin changes. Most skin changes are not cancer. But if you see any changes in your skin, call your dermatologist right away. Only they can tell you if a change is a problem. If you have skin cancer, seeing your provider can be the first step to getting the treatment that could save your life.

COMMON TYPES OF SKIN CANCERS

Basal Cell Carcinoma:

Basal cell cancer is the most common skin cancer. It starts in basal cells in the deepest part of the epidermis. It's usually found on sun-exposed skin, like the face, ears, neck, trunk, or arms, but it can start anywhere. These lesions vary in color and may be waxy, pearly, scaly, or scar-like. Tiny blood vessels can sometimes be seen through the lesion's surface. These lesions can bleed easily and might not heal well. Nearly all basal cell cancers can be treated and cured if they're found early.

Squamous Cell Carcinoma:

Squamous cell cancer is the second most common type of skin cancer. It starts in flat cells called squamous cells. Lesions often form on the face, ears, neck, hands, or arms – places that get a lot of sun. The lesions are firm, red bumps or flat, scaly, crusty growths. They may be sores that keep healing and reopening. Squamous cell carcinoma is more likely to grow and spread to other parts of the body than basal cell carcinoma, though this is rare. Most squamous cell carcinoma is found early enough to be treated and cured.

Melanoma:

Melanoma is a less common, but much more dangerous kind of skin cancer. It starts in skin cells called melanocytes. It's much more likely to grow and spread than basal or squamous cell cancers. Finding and treating it early is key. It's often not easy to tell where a melanoma lesion's borders are. It's often brown or black, but may be a mix of colors with pink, tan, or white. The shape and size of melanoma lesions tend to differ from one side to the other. Melanoma is most often found on sun exposed skin, but can start anywhere, like the genitals, mouth, palms of hands, bottoms of feet, and under the nails.

RARE SKIN CANCERS

There are rarer forms of Skin Cancers. These less common types can be more aggressive, so staying vigilant about unusual skin changes is important for early detection. These include:

- **Merkel Cell Cancer:** An aggressive cancer that starts in touch receptors in the skin.
- **Kaposi Sarcoma:** A rare form of cancer that develops in the cells lining your lymph vessels and blood vessels.
- **Cutaneous lymphomas:** A type of cancer, that originate in the immune system cells of the skin.

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PRECANCERS AKA ACTINIC KERATOSES

An actinic keratosis, or plural actinic keratoses, is commonly referred to as an “AK”. An AK is not a skin cancer type, but rather precancer. It is a common, pre-cancerous skin change that can turn into a squamous cell skin cancer over time if it’s not treated. AK lesions tend to be found on sun-exposed parts of the body. They can be pink, reddish-brown, or skincolored. These lesions are often small, raised, scaly, and rough, like sandpaper. In some cases, AK lesions hurt. Most people with them have more than one lesion. Getting early treatment for AK almost always cures the lesions.

UNDERSTANDING THE SKIN: ITS 3 LAYERS

Epidermis:

This is the thin outer layer of the skin. It’s the main barrier to the world outside our bodies. It’s made of 3 types of cells: squamous cells, basal cells, and melanocytes.

- **Squamous cells** are flat cells in the outermost layer. They are always shedding off as new ones are forming.
- **Basal cells** are round cells found just beneath the squamous cells at the base of the epidermis. They change into squamous cells as they get closer to the surface of the skin.
- **Melanocytes** are scattered through the basal layer. They make melanin to give skin its color.

Dermis:

This middle layer of skin is where blood and lymph vessels, hair follicles, oil and sweat glands, nerves, collagen are found. It supports the epidermis and it is a key part of wound healing. It also gives the skin flexibility and strength.

Hypodermis:

This is the deepest layer of the skin. It’s made of fat, collagen, and blood vessels. It helps insulate the body, helps absorb shock, and protects the body from injury. Skin cancer forms in the epidermis. It can start in the basal cells, squamous cells, or melanocytes.

WHOS AT RISK?

- Fair skin that freckles easily and burns instead of tanning.
- Light-colored or red hair.
- Light-colored eyes.
- Many moles or abnormal moles on your skin.
- A long history of unprotected exposure to sunlight or tanning beds.
- A history of many blistering sunburns as a child or teen.
- A family history of skin cancer.
- Been exposed to radiation or chemicals.
- A weakened immune system.
- Been exposed to arsenic If you have had skin cancer in the past, you are at high risk of having it again.

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HOW TO CHECK YOUR SKIN

Watch for new spots on your skin or a spot that's changing in color, shape, size. If you have a lot of moles, take digital photos of them each month. Make sure to take photos both up close and from a distance. These can help you see if any moles change over time.

Do your monthly skin checkups in front of a full-length mirror. Use a room with good lighting so it's easier to see. Use a hand mirror to look at hard-to-see places like your buttocks and back. You can also have a trusted friend or family member help you with these checks. Check every part of your body, including:

- **Head** (ears, face, neck, and scalp)
- **Torso** (front, back, sides, and under breasts)
- **Arms** (tops, undersides, and armpits)
- **Hands** (palms, backs, fingers, and under the nails)
- **Lower back, buttocks, and genitals**
- **Legs** (front, back, and sides)
- **Feet** (tops, soles, toes, under the nails, and between toes)

ABCDE'S OF CHECKING MOLES FOR MELANOMA

Check your moles or growths for signs of melanoma using ABCDE:

- **Asymmetry:** The sides of the mole or growth don't match.
- **Border:** The edges are ragged, notched, or blurred.
- **Color:** The color within the mole or growth varies. It could be black, brown, tan, white, or shades of red, gray, or blue.
- **Diameter:** The mole or growth is larger than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch or 6 mm (size of a pencil eraser).
- **Evolving:** The size, shape, texture, or color of the mole or growth is changing. This is probably the most important sign to be aware of.

CHECKING FOR OTHER TYPES OF SKIN CANCER

- A sore that doesn't heal; it is common for people to first think it was an acne blemish or a bug bite
- Changes in how an area feels, such as itching, tenderness, or pain
- Changes in the skin's surface, such as oozing, bleeding, or scaliness
- A new spot that looks different from all other marks on your skin

OTHER RESOURCES

We work hard to publish only best patient education and comprehensive resources. We want to be your trusted source of all skin information. You will find additional educational information by scanning the following QR codes.

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