CENTER FOR SIGHT
YOUR CLEAR CHOICE

Skin Cancer FAQ

What is skin cancer?
Skin cancer is the most common of all cancers. It is a disease in which malignant cells are found in the outer layers of your skin. Several types of cancer can start in the skin. The most common are basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma. These types are called non-melanoma skin cancer.

What are the symptoms of skin cancer?
The most common warning sign of skin cancer is a change on the skin, especially a new growth or a sore that doesn't heal. Skin cancers do not all look the same. The cancer may start as a small, smooth, shiny, pale or waxy lump. Or it can appear as a firm red lump. Sometimes, the lump bleeds or develops a crust. It can also start as a flat red spot that is rough, dry or scaly.

Both basal and squamous cell cancers are found mainly on areas of the skin that are exposed to the sun – the head, face, neck, hands and arms. However, skin cancer can occur anywhere.

What causes skin cancer?
Several risk factors increase the chance of getting skin cancer. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun is the main cause of skin cancer. For this reason, skin specialists recommend that people use sunscreens that block both kinds of UV radiation (UVA and UVB).

Artificial sources of UV radiation, such as sunlamps and tanning booths, can also cause skin cancer. Although anyone can get skin cancer, the risk is greatest for people who have fair skin that freckles easily – often those with red or blond hair and blue or light colored eyes.

In addition, skin cancer is related to lifetime exposure to UV radiation. Most skin cancers appear after age 50, but the sun's damaging effects begin at an early age. Therefore, protection should start in childhood to prevent skin cancer later in life.

How can I prevent skin cancer?
Whenever possible, people should avoid exposure to the midday sun (from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. standard time, or from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daylight saving time). Keep in mind that protective clothing, such as sun hats and long sleeves, can block out the sun's harmful rays. Also, lotions that contain sunscreens can protect the skin. Sunscreens are rated in strength according to a sun protection factor (SPF), which ranges from 2 to 30 or higher. Those rated 15 to 30 block most of the sun's harmful rays.

How can I detect skin cancer?
Check yourself regularly for new growths or changes in the skin. Skin cancer is almost totally curable when caught in the early stages. Performing a self-examination requires a full length mirror, a hand mirror and a well-lighted room.

- Examine your body front and back in the mirror
- Bend elbows and look at your arms and the palms of your hands
- Look at your legs and feet, spaces between toes and bottom of soles
- your back and buttocks with a hand mirror
- Examine your neck and scalp with a hand mirror

Any suspicious spots should be reported to your doctor. The doctor should also look at your skin during routine physical exams.

How is skin cancer diagnosed?
When an area of skin does not look normal, the doctor will perform a biopsy (removal of all or part of growth). The tissue is examined under the microscope to determine if it is cancerous.

Doctors generally divide skin cancer into two stages: local (affecting only the skin) or metastatic (spreading beyond the skin). Because skin cancer rarely spreads, a biopsy often is the only test needed to determine the stage. In cases where the growth is very large or has been present for a long time, the doctor will carefully check the lymph nodes in the area. In addition, you may have to have additional tests, such as special x-rays, to find out whether the cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Knowing the stage of a skin cancer helps the doctor plan the best treatment.

What will my doctor do if I have skin cancer?
In treating skin cancer, the doctor's main goal is to remove or destroy the cancer completely with as small a scar as possible. To plan the best treatment, the doctor considers the location and size of the cancer, the risk of scarring, and the person's age, general health, and medical history.

It is sometimes helpful to have the advice of more than one doctor before starting treatment. It may take a week or two to arrange for a second opinion, but this short delay will not reduce the chance that treatment will be successful.

How will my skin cancer be treated?

Treatment for skin cancer usually involves some type of surgery. In some cases, doctors suggest radiation therapy or chemotherapy. Sometimes a combination of these methods is used.

What should I do after I have had my skin cancer treated?

Even though most skin cancers are cured, people who have been treated for skin cancer have a higher-than-average risk of developing a new cancer of the skin. That is why it is so important that you continue to examine yourself regularly, to visit your doctor for regular checkups, and to follow your doctor's instructions on how to reduce your risk of developing skin cancer again.

What are the types of skin cancer?

The most common kinds of skin cancer are basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma arises from the basal cells, small round cells found in the lower part (or base) of the epidermis.

Squamous cell carcinoma begins in squamous cells, which are thin, flat cells that look like fish scales found in the tissue that forms the surface of the skin, the lining of the hollow organs of the body, and the passages of the respiratory and digestive tracts.

Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are sometimes called non-melanoma skin cancer. Another type of cancer that occurs in the skin is melanoma that arises in melanocytes, cells that produce pigment. Melanoma usually begins in a mole.

What are the early warning signs?

The ABCD's of melanoma are as follows:

- A - Asymmetry (common moles are round and symmetrical)
- B - Border (skin cancers may have uneven borders)
- C - Color (watch for varied shades of brown, tan or black and also red, white, and blue)
- D - Diameter (if a spot is larger than a pencil eraser (6mm or ¼ inch in diameter) it could be trouble)

How does a mole change?

Aside from the ABCD's, you should watch out for these changes:

- Size – mole suddenly or continuously gets larger
- Elevation – a mole that was flat or slightly elevated increases in height rapidly
- Surrounding skin – skin around the mole becomes red or develops colored blemishes or swellings
- Surface – a smooth mole develops scaliness, erosion, oozing, crusting, ulceration, and bleeding
- Sensation – there is itching, tenderness or pain.

How can skin cancer be prevented?

Whenever possible, people should avoid exposure to the midday sun (from 10AM to 2PM). Keep in mind that protective clothing, such as sun hats and long sleeves, can block out the sun's harmful rays. Also, lotions that contain sunscreens can protect the skin.

How do I schedule an appointment?
Go to centerforsight.net and click "schedule an appointment" or call 925-2020.