

Basal Cell Cancer

In the United States, skin cancer is the most common malignant tumor. In fact, there are more skin cancers in the US than all other cancers combined. Basal Cell Cancer will affect one in five Americans. It is most often found on the face, neck, hands, or other parts of the body that have been exposed to the sun. The good news is detection is relatively simple and if found early, treatment is simple and usually successful.

Basal cell cancer is also called Basal cell carcinoma. This type of cancer can have many different appearances: a red patch or irritated area; a smooth, shiny and waxy looking bump; a white or yellow scar-like area; a smooth reddish growth; or an open sore that won't heal, bleeds or oozes.

Not all growths on your skin are cancer. A dermatologist often has to take a biopsy to confidently diagnose skin cancer. Pigmented basal cell carcinoma has brown or black pigmentation and may simulate melanoma.

The usual cause of Basal cell cancer is chronic sun exposure and sunburns. The ultraviolet light in sunlight is a form of radiation, and this damages your skin leading to skin cancer. Much of the sun exposure is from your youth and cancers that result show up years later. Basal cell carcinoma is usually a problem for people with fair skin, light eyes and a poor ability to tan. Other determining factors include your family's history of skin cancer and an impaired immune system.

Why is there so much skin cancer today? Part of the answer is that we are outdoors more, wearing less clothing than past generations did. But there is more ultraviolet light coming down to earth also, due to the ozone layer. To what degree this is causing skin cancer is still a matter of debate. Estimates show that a 5% decrease in ozone could lead to a 10% increase in basal cell cancer.

We have learned a lot about how skin cancer forms. The skin has several layers with different types of cells. The outermost part of the skin is called the epidermis. It is where most skin cancers start. Here you find three kinds of cells: flat, scaly cells on the surface called squamous cells; round cells called basal cells; and cells called melanocytes, which give your skin its color.

These three cell types each can develop a distinctive type of cancer. The type of cancer is named after the cell- Squamous cell carcinoma, Basal Cell Carcinoma or Melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma is less serious than the other two types of skin cancer. While it rarely metastasizes it will cause extensive local damage if not treated.

The factors that influence the choice of treatment are the size, shape, location and type of Basal cell cancer. Other factors to consider are the age and health of the patient and whether the cancer is recurrent (arising in a previously treated site).

Small Basal cell cancers, less than one half an inch, can be treated by many methods. Most commonly used is curettage and electrodesiccation (scraping away the tumor tissue and then destroying a thin surrounding layer with heat). Other commonly used treatments are surgical excision and Cryosurgery (liquid nitrogen freezing using a temperature probe to ensure temperature of -50°C).

Basal cell cancers that are large, recurrent or arising in cosmetically sensitive areas are treated best with Mohs' surgery (a specialized type of microscopically controlled surgery). Radiation treatments and excision with skin grafting or surgical reconstruction can also be used.

If you have a basal cell carcinoma you have almost a 50% chance of developing another skin cancer in the next 5 years. Regular exams by a dermatologist, and a monthly scan of your own skin for new and changing growths should be done. Of course, all skin cancer patients should limit or avoid sun exposure, wear hats and other protective clothing, and use sunscreens with a sun protection factor of at least 45.