

SKIN CANCER/MOHS RECONSTRUCTION

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. More than 500,000 new cases are reported each year and the incidence is rising faster than any other type of cancer. While skin cancers can be found on any part of the body, about 80 percent appear on the face, head, or neck, where they can be disfiguring as well as dangerous.

Types of skin cancer

Types of skin cancer include:

Basal cell carcinoma

This is the most common form of skin cancer though, it's also the least dangerous kind. It tends to grow slowly and rarely spreads beyond its original site. Basal cell carcinoma is seldom life-threatening, if left untreated it can grow deep beneath the skin and into the underlying tissue and bone, causing serious damage particularly if it's located near the eye.

Squamous cell carcinoma

This is the next most common type of skin cancer, frequently appearing on the lips, face, or ears. It sometimes spreads to distant sites, including lymph nodes and internal organs. Squamous cell carcinoma can become life threatening if it is not treated.

Malignant melanoma

This is the least common, but its incidence is increasing rapidly, especially in the Sunbelt states. Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous type of skin cancer. If discovered early enough, it can be completely cured. If it is not treated quickly, however, malignant melanoma may spread throughout the body and is often deadly.

Other skin growths you should know about

Two other common types of skin growths are moles (nevi) and keratoses.

Moles are clusters of heavily pigmented skin cells, either flat or raised above the skin surface. While most pose no danger, some-particularly large moles present at birth, or those with mottled colors and poorly defined borders-may develop into malignant melanoma. Moles are frequently removed for cosmetic reasons, or

because they are constantly irritated by clothing or jewelry, which can sometimes indicate pre-cancerous changes.

Solar or Actinic Keratoses are rough, red or brown, scaly patches on the skin. They are usually found on areas exposed to the sun, and sometimes develop into squamous cell cancer.

Small lesions in non-visible parts of the body can be removed by a dermatologist if he/she feels comfortable with the procedure. Larger lesions or those in a cosmetically visible area are usually treated by a plastic surgeon.

Mohs surgery

In areas of the body such as the face where the dermatologist wants to remove the cancer but minimize the amount of normal tissue removed as well, Mohs surgery is an effective option. A Mohs surgeon is a dermatologist trained in pathology who will excise and evaluate small portions of the lesion to ensure it is all removed leaving a minimal defect.

Traditionally, the Mohs surgeon would then refer the patient to the plastic surgeon for the definitive reconstruction. Recently some Mohs surgeons have taken on the reconstructive aspects of skin cancer as well.

Choosing a doctor

If you are concerned about skin cancer, a dermatologist is the best place to start. If you notice an unusual growth yourself, consult a plastic surgeon or a dermatologist. Both are skilled at diagnosing and treating skin cancer and other skin growths. A plastic surgeon can surgically remove the growth in a manner that maintains function and offers the most pleasing final appearance, a consideration that may be especially important if it is presented in a highly visible area. If a treatment other than surgical excision is called for, the plastic surgeon can refer you to the appropriate specialist.

Diagnosis and treatment

Skin cancer is diagnosed by removing all or part of the growth and examining its cells under a microscope. It can be treated by a number of methods, depending on the type of cancer, its stage of growth, and its location on your body. Most skin cancers are removed surgically. If the cancer is small, the procedure can be done quickly and easily, in an outpatient facility or the physician's office, using local anesthesia. The procedure may be a simple excision, which usually leaves a thin, barely visible scar. If the cancer lesion is large or has spread to the lymph glands or elsewhere in the body, major surgery may be required.

Make sure that you discuss options and concerns with your surgeon. Our surgeons are willing to answer any and all questions you might have.

Reconstruction

The different techniques used in treating skin cancers can be life saving, but they may leave a patient with less than pleasing cosmetic or functional results. Depending on the location and severity of the cancer, the consequences may range from a small but unsightly scar to permanent changes in facial structures such as your nose, ear, or lip.

In such cases, no matter who performs the initial treatment, the plastic surgeon can be an important part of the treatment team. Reconstructive techniques, ranging from a simple scar revision to a complex transfer of tissue flaps from elsewhere on the body, can often repair damaged tissue, rebuild body parts, and restore most patients to acceptable appearance and function.

Preventing a recurrence

After you have been treated for skin cancer, you should schedule regular follow-up visits with your dermatologist to make sure the cancer has not returned.

Your dermatologist, however, cannot prevent a recurrence. It's up to you to reduce your risks by changing old habits and developing new ones. These preventive measures also apply to people who have not had skin cancer.

- Avoid prolonged exposure to the sun, especially between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. and during the summer months. Remember, ultraviolet rays pass right through water and clouds, and reflect off sand and snow.
- When you do go out for an extended period of time, wear protective clothing such as wide brimmed hats and long sleeves.
- On any exposed skin, use a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 15. Reapply it frequently, especially after you've been swimming or sweating.

Finally, examine your skin regularly. If you find anything suspicious, consult your plastic surgeon or a dermatologist as soon as possible.