

Ask a Medical Expert:

Answers to all your Health and Wellness Concerns

Skin Cancer

Q What are the treatment options for skin cancer? Are different treatments better for specific areas of the body? For example, my friend had skin cancer on her face, and the surgery left a scar.

A. Skin cancers comprise the most frequent type of cancers that occur in human beings, and there are several different types. The treatment option selected will depend on many things including the type of skin cancer, location on the body, history of prior treatment and overall patient health. The most common types of skin cancers, basal cell carcinomas and squamous cell carcinomas, can sometimes occur as superficial variants. Superficial variants of these cancers can sometimes be destroyed with prescription creams, chemicals, lasers or cold liquids. Invasive variants of these cancers as well as malignant melanomas are usually removed surgically in their entirety, often with a margin of safety. Surgical excision is preferred because invasive cancers have a higher risk of recurrence or metastasis, and need to be examined under a microscope by a pathologist to ensure that they have been completely removed. For cases where surgery is inconvenient or dangerous for the patient, radiation therapy can sometimes be used with good results. Your dermatologist is well trained not only to identify skin cancer, but also to treat them with most advanced destructive and surgical techniques.

Alix J. Charles, MD, The Dermatology Institute

Q Are all skin types and ethnicities affected by skin cancer, and are its characteristics the same for all skin colors?

A. Although skin cancers are more prevalent in lighter skin types, patients with pigmented skin types also have the potential to develop skin cancers. People with darker skin often have a false sense of security when it comes to skin cancer; they may often feel that by having darker skin they are “exempt” from this potential risk. Although patients with increased skin pigmentation have added UV protection, African American, Asian, Latino and Native American backgrounds have been found to have a higher morbidity and mortality rates for skin cancers in comparison to lighter skin types. The decreased survival rate is a result of misdiagnosis or late detection.

There are three types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma (BCC), squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and malignant melanoma. Both light and dark skin types can be affected by these skin cancers, although it is more common to diagnosis both BCC and SCC in lighter skin types. Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous and deadly form of skin cancer in ethnic skin types.

The bottom line is that we are all born with unique and beautiful skin types, and we are all vulnerable to skin cancer in different ways. You should be sure to visit your doctor regularly to discuss any concerns you have, and protect yourself from the sun and other dangers and check yourself regularly for any changes to your skin.

Renuka H. Bhatt, MD, Fine Skin Dermatology

Q Is skin cancer becoming increasingly more common? What’s causing more cases of it, and how can I practice prevention?

A. The incidence of melanoma has increased in the U.S. and worldwide during the last four decades. Estimates showed that 47,700 people in the U.S. were expected to be diagnosed with melanoma in 2000, but that number rose to 68,720 in 2009. Although the increased prevalence of melanoma may be partially explained by an increased rate of detection, Americans have increased exposure to excess ultraviolet radiation – from the sun as well as tanning beds. By avoiding excess ultraviolet exposure, an individual will decrease his or her probability of developing skin cancer. Early detection of skin cancer is also important because early detection will increase survival rate significantly. To find a board-certified dermatologist and skin cancer screenings in your area, please check out the website of the American Academy of Dermatology (aad.org/checkspot).

Amy Derick, MD, Derick Dermatology

Q What age does skin cancer occur? What are my risks at 20, 30, 40 years old?

A. While most skin cancers are diagnosed in people over the age of 50, the damaging effects of the sun begin in childhood. Protecting yourself from the sun as a teenager may prevent skin cancers from occurring even decades later. Studies have shown that even a single blistering sunburn in your lifetime increases your risk of developing melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer. Also, the use of tanning beds before the age of 35 increases the risk of skin cancer by almost 75 percent. I have personally diagnosed several women in their 20s with melanoma, and all of them were regular customers at a tanning salon. So don’t go tanning! And given that skin cancers can occur in adults of any age, annual skin exams by a board-certified dermatologist are recommended to identify suspicious skin lesions *before* they turn into skin cancer.

Rany Jazayerli, M.D., Clear Skin Dermatology

We are committed to addressing all the unique health issues of women. If you have a question, our health professionals have an answer. Please send your questions and concerns to ashleigh@suburbanwoman.net.