

The general warning signs of skin cancer include:

- any changes in size, colour, shape, or texture of any skin growth.
- an open or inflamed skin wound that won't heal.

Melanoma, the most dangerous type of skin cancer, may appear as:

- a change in an existing mole.
- a small, dark, multicoloured spot with jagged borders (either elevated or flat) that may bleed and form a scab.
- a clump of shiny, firm, dark bumps.

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) may appear on sun-exposed skin as:

- a flesh-coloured oval lump which may develop into a ulcer that bleeds.
- a smooth red spot pierced in the centre.
- a reddish, brown, or bluish black patch of skin on the chest or back.

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) may appear on sun-exposed skin as:

- a firm, red, bump that grows gradually.
- a flat spot that becomes a bleeding sore that won't heal.

This is a disease of the outer skin layer called the epidermis. Skin is very complex part of our systems. There are two main parts to the skin. The outer layer... The epidermis - which consists of several layers of cells and the lowest parts. It is at this point that the cells divide and move their way up to the surface. Once at the surface, the cells will flatten and die. They consist of keratin. The whole process takes nearly four weeks. Throughout the epidermis are melanocytes, which are cells that produce a protective pigment called melanin.

Skin cancers fall into two major categories: melanoma and non-melanoma. Melanoma is cancer of melanocytes and is the cancer of the skin which is most feared. It can start in a mole or birthmark, or in normal skin. Melanoma usually appears first on the torso, although it can occur on the palm of the hand; on the sole of the foot; under a fingernail or toenail; in the mucous linings of the mouth, vagina, or anus; and even in the eye. Melanoma is dangerous and often fatal. It can be seen and detected quite easily and readily cured. But this cancer can also spread beyond the skin to other areas and this is where the difficulty lies in treating and curing the disease.

The two most common skin cancers, basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), are non-melanomas, and are not usually fatal. They progress slowly, and stay localised on the skin, are detected easily, and are usually curable. BCC grows the slowest while SCC is somewhat more aggressive and more inclined to spread.

Some non-cancerous skin growths can eventually become cancerous.

One positive characteristic of skin cancer is that because it is based on the skin - the outside covering - it is easily visible and detectable early on in the stages. If it is detected and treated early, it will normally be cured.

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the world. Most cases are cured, but the problem is that it can affect so many people. People with celtic colouring - red hair, blue eyes and fair skin - are the highest risk group. It is most common in Australia.

Causes

Skin cancer is caused by too much sun exposure. Sunlight contains ultraviolet (UV) rays that can alter the genetic material in skin cells, causing mutations.

Also things to avoid to much exposure to are sunlamps, tanning booths, and x-rays. As these instruments can also damage skin and cause cancerous growths.

BCC and SCC have been linked to chronic sun exposure.

Melanoma is linked to excessive sunbathing that causes your skin to be scorched and blistered. It is reported that one blistering sunburn episode during childhood can double a person's risk for developing melanoma later in life.

The people most vulnerable to melanoma are -

- Fair-skinned people
- Redheads
- blue-eyed blonds
- people with pigment disorders
- people with many freckles or moles.
- Workers exposed to substances such as coal tar, radium, insecticides and other carcinogens.

Without a doubt, exposure to ultraviolet radiation is the most common cause of skin cancer as the main way of preventing this disease is by limiting skin's exposure to ultraviolet radiation. Hereditary may play a part in whether or not you eventually succumb to the disease.

It is important that you perform self examinations regularly - looking at every inch of your body, if you do not know what to look for, go to your doctor who can explain the different skin cancers can look. If you find a growth, have it examined by your doctor or dermatologist immediately.

All potentially cancerous skin growths must be confirmed by a cancer diagnosis. Always go to your doctor to have them checked out. They should never be removed by shaving, burning, or freezing because those techniques do not allow pathologic examination of the growth.

Traditional Treatments

Fortunately, most skin cancers are detected and cured before they spread. Melanoma that has spread to other organs poses the greatest problem.

Standard treatments for localised basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas are safe and effective and cause very few side effects. Small tumours can also be removed.

In some cases where BCC or SCC has begun to spread beyond the skin, tumours are removed surgically and patients are treated with chemotherapy, radiation, or immunotherapy. Although it is usually rare for the cancers to spread beyond the localised site.

Melanoma tumours must be removed surgically as soon as they are detected. Neither radiation nor chemotherapy will cure advanced melanoma, but either treatment may slow the disease and relieve symptoms.

If you have had skin cancer previously, you are more at risk of getting it again. Anyone who has been treated for skin cancer of any kind should have regular checkups. (See the entry on Cancer for more information).

Prevention

if you are at risk of getting skin cancer, it is wise to try to prevent it's occurrence by following these steps -

- Avoid the hottest part of the day - around lunchtime - 11 am to 2 pm.
- Wear clothes that cover your exposed body parts and strong uv protection cream.
- Use a sun screen with a sun protection factor of 15 or higher whenever you are outside.
- Consider taking a B-complex vitamin.
- Do regular self examinations and report any suspicious looking marks or skin lesions to a doctor at once

When to seek further professional advice

- you notice any of the symptoms mentioned above.