

Ask Dr. Mikell

By Dr. Oswald Mikell

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American Board of Dermatology | American Board of Cosmetic Surgery | Physician of the Year 2008

Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, but fortunately it's one of the most preventable cancers. The more you learn – the better your chance of prevention. And, the sooner you seek treatment if you suspect something irregular, the better your chance of remission and survival.

Q: What is skin cancer?

A: Cancer occurs when normal cells grow and multiply. As the cells multiply, they form a mass called tumors or lesions. These tumors are cancerous only if they are malignant – meaning that they invade neighboring tissues because of their uncontrolled growth.

Q: Are there different types of skin cancer?

A: Skin cancers are divided into 2 main types: keratinocyte cancers (basal and squamous cell skin cancers) and melanomas.

Basal and squamous cell skin cancers are the most common and are found mainly on parts of the body exposed to the sun, such as the head and neck. They are directly related to the amount of sun exposure accumulated over a person's lifetime. Melanomas are cancers that develop from melanocytes, the cells that make the brown pigment that gives skin its color. Melanocytes can also form benign growths – more commonly known as moles. They can occur anywhere on the body, but are more likely to develop in certain locations. The trunk is the most common site in men – and the legs in women.

Q: How can I check for skin cancer?

A: It's important to check your own skin, preferably once a month. A self-exam is best done in a well-lit room in front of a full-length mirror. You can use a hand-held mirror for areas that are hard to see. A spouse or close friend or family member may be able to help you with these exams, especially for those hard-to-see areas like the lower back or the back of your thighs. Any trouble spots should be seen by a dermatologist right away.

Q: Is it true I can get skin cancer from a tanning bed?

A: Yes. The UVA rays emitted from the Ultraviolet A light sources in tanning salons are two to three times more powerful than the UVA rays which occur naturally from the sun - potentially making them two to three more times dangerous.

Q: What is the treatment for skin cancer?

A: There are several different types of treatments ranging from freezing to surgeries depending on the type of skin cancer, location, and severity. Your dermatologist will counsel you on the proper course of action.

Q: What is Mohs Surgery?

A:

Mohs micrographic surgery is unique and precise - instead of removing the whole clinically visible tumor and a large area of normal-appearing skin around it; the Mohs surgeon removes the minimum amount of healthy tissue and totally removes the cancer. Thin layers of tissue are removed and examined under a microscope for malignant cells. When all areas of tissue are tumor-free, the surgery is complete.

This procedure does not require general anesthesia, and most patients can be managed on an outpatient basis.

Exposure to the sun is a known cause of skin cancer - even a few serious sunburns can increase your risk of getting skin cancer in the future. Take precautions in the sun, wear sunscreen, and routinely perform self-exams. Early detection and early treatment are crucial. If you see anything unusual – call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry today and schedule a consult today (843) 689-5259.