

Dermatology, Oncology and Plastic Surgery

Basal cell carcinoma

What is a basal cell carcinoma?

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) is the most common form of skin cancer and is normally a very slow growing form of skin cancer. It rarely spreads to other areas or organs in the body. If left untreated, BCC can develop into a rodent ulcer which can disfigure, so early recognition is important.

What causes BCC?

The most common cause of BCC is long term exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun or sun beds. They occur on sun exposed skin, such as the face, scalp, ears, hands, shoulders and back. They can also form where there is damaged skin caused by burns, ulcers or scars.

There are certain groups of people who are at higher risk of developing BCC which include:

- Those who have fair skin and blonde or red hair.
- People who have had a lot of exposure to the sun such as outdoor workers, those who have outdoor hobbies and those living in sunny climates.
- People who have had a previous skin cancer.
- Those who use sun beds.

They are more common in men than women and are frequently seen in people aged over 50, although a greater number of younger adults are



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now developing this form of skin cancer.

Please remember, basal cell carcinomas are curable.

What are the signs of a BCC?

BCC usually appear as an open sore or ulcer. It may bleed or crust but it does not heal.

- BCC can look like a red patch on the skin, which may be itchy or crusty.
- Some BCCs will have a pearly rim.
- Others can be lumpy and with shiny nodules within it.
- If left untreated an ulcer may develop where the BCC destroys the skin.

How is a BCC diagnosed?

Most people will be referred to a skin specialist called a dermatologist at the hospital. These doctors will discuss with you about the treatment options, which may include the following:

- a biopsy, which is the removal of a small sample of the abnormal skin
- an excision, which is removing the entire lesion

Local anaesthetic will be given before both of these procedures, to numb the area. It will then be analysed under a microscope.

How is a BCC treated?

The doctor will discuss with you and sometimes other members of the skin cancer team, which treatment they think is the best for you, depending on the size and location of your BCC. We have more information about these treatments which will be given to you as required. Please ask if this information is not made available to you at the appropriate time.

Surgery: This is normally the first treatment option for a BCC, enabling the doctor to remove it and also some non-cancerous skin, ensuring all of the cancerous cells have been removed. If it is a small BCC, this will be removed under local anaesthetic. If it is large, you may require a general anaesthetic and the plastic surgeon will perform the operation, as a skin

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graft may be required. This will be discussed with you before any operation so that you are aware of the procedure you will be having.

Other treatments which may be suggested are as follows:

Watch and Wait: due to this type of skin cancer growing very slowly, your doctor may suggest no treatment but will ask you to come back for follow up appointments to monitor the BCC.

Radiotherapy: we may treat the cancer using high energy rays to destroy the cancer cells.

Creams: we may advise you to use a chemotherapy cream called 5FU or a cream that helps the immune system to attack the cancer cells called Aldara.

Photodynamic therapy: this procedure uses a laser together with a light sensitive drug that destroys the cancerous cells.

Curettage and Cautery: this is a procedure where the affected area is numbed with local anaesthetic and scraped away (curettage) and then resealed (cautery).

Cryotherapy: this is when we freeze the affected area with liquid nitrogen.

Moh's microscopic surgery: this is where the cancer is taken away layer by layer and examined under the microscope straight away. Each layer is checked as it is removed until there are no signs of cancer present, minimising the amount of healthy tissue taken away. A local anaesthetic will be given to numb the area. If a skin graft is required this will be discussed with you before the treatment.

Follow up

Your follow up may depend on your treatment. Usually the doctor will see you once following the procedure to check the site of where the cancer

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was and that it has healed well. They will also give you the results of the biopsy.

How can BCC be prevented?

- If you have had one BCC, you are more likely to develop another over the years. Examine your skin every month for early warning signs.
- Systematically look and feel for any changes in your skin. Ask someone you feel comfortable with to examine your back, neck, ears or scalp. Alternatively, a mirror can be used to examine these areas.
- Wear protective clothing and wide brimmed hats when outdoors. These will protect the skin areas most at risk.
- Wear sunglasses- look for glasses with the label for the CE Mark and British Standard UV 400 label and 100% UV protection written on the label/sticker and protection at the side of the eye.
- Avoid sun exposure during the hours of 11am to 3 pm and seek shade
- Use high factor sun cream, at least SPF 30 when out in the sun which also has a 4 or 5 star rating.

Apply them before going out in the sun and re-apply every 2 to 3 hours, or more often if perspiring or swimming.

- Advise others, especially family and friends, to protect themselves and carry out annual whole body checks.
- UV rays can penetrate water; wear a light t-shirt that does not become transparent in water
- **Never** use a sun bed

Your keyworker is your consultant who can offer information about BCC's and offer support if required.

Free prescriptions

All cancer patients since April 2009 are entitled to free prescriptions. Please ask your nurse, doctor or pharmacist about this.

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Compensation

There may be compensation available for those who served in the armed forces before 6th April 2005 and have developed a skin cancer. For more information about this, please contact the free Veterans Helpline on: 0800 169 2277, where your case can be discussed further.

www.veterans-uk.info/

Or contact:

War Pensions Agency
Norcross
Blackpool
FY5 3WP

If you would like further advice about your skin cancer, treatment or require support please contact:

- Macmillan Skin Cancer Nurse Specialists on 024 7696 6085, or 024 7696 4000 bleep 4316

If you require advice about plastic surgery procedures or dressings please contact:

- Plastic Surgery Specialist Nurse via Switchboard 024 7696 4000 Bleep 1676

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, contact 024 7696 6085 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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