

Basal Cell Carcinoma

Your skin biopsy recently examined by a pathologist has been diagnosed as a *basal cell carcinoma*. These skin cancers are the most common type of skin cancer; in fact, they rank as the most common type of cancer in humans. Basal cell carcinomas typically grow slowly, rarely spread, or metastasize, to other parts of the body, and they are usually cured when treated early. Each year, almost 3 million Americans are diagnosed with this condition.

Understanding Your Skin

The skin is the largest organ in your body that works hard making millions of new cells every day. It helps control body temperature and keeps you from losing fluid. It protects you from microorganisms and has sensitive nerve endings that allow us to sense the outside world by touching. And we have a lot of it, from 12 to 20 square feet!

Your skin is multi-layered and the top protective layer, the epidermis, has several sub-layers working to maintain the skin. One of these sub-layers is called the *basal* layer and is made up of basal cells.

Who gets basal cell carcinoma?

Basal cell carcinoma is a form of skin cancer that usually results from exposure to sunlight or ultraviolet radiation. If you have had a lot of sun exposure, and have light-colored eyes and hair, you can be more prone to basal cell carcinoma developing. These generally appear on all sun-exposed areas: arms, legs, neck, back and head. Although this condition is more common in people over 40, it can also occur in younger people, even children, particularly if they have experienced severe sunburns at an early age.

How do skin cells become cancer?

Sun exposure can cause certain chemical changes which damages the DNA of your skin cells and changes cell

instructions of how to reproduce themselves. So then instead of dying off, those affected cells continue to reproduce, but they don't make normal cells, they make more damaged cells – *cancer cells* – and these appear as a growth on your skin. Pathologists can confirm the abnormally growing cells by looking at a tissue sample under a microscope.

Taking the Next Step – Treatments and Preventions

These skin cancers grow very slowly and most often can be cured when treated early. Sometimes basal cell cancers can return, but they almost never spread to other parts of the body. However, if left untreated they can become very disfiguring, especially when on the face.

A basal cell carcinoma can usually be removed using surgical techniques done in your doctor's office. Sometimes freezing or a topical medicine application can be used. Your doctor will discuss the options that are best for you.

Prevention is also very important. Whenever you are outdoors wear protective clothing, particularly a hat to shade your face and neck. And *always* wear sunscreen that protects you from both UVA and UVB ultraviolet light. Try

to minimize sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun is strongest. Remember, even cloudy days can cause exposure. If you notice *any* new changes on your skin, contact your doctor immediately.

Learn More and Stay Informed

These trusted resources can provide more information to learn more.

<http://www.skincancer.org>

<http://health.nih.gov/topic/SkinCancer>

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/skincancerandmelanoma/html/_no_50_no_0.htm

Sun exposure is almost always the cause of basal cell skin cancer. It's the most common type of skin cancer, but it is very curable when treated early.

This material is intended for patient education and information only. It does not constitute advice, nor should it be taken to suggest or replace professional medical care from your physician. Your treatment options may vary, depending upon medical history and current condition. Only your physician and you can determine your best option.

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