

Actinic Keratosis

Your recent skin biopsy examined by pathologists is diagnosed as *actinic keratosis*. This condition is very common; scientists estimate about 58 million Americans have actinic keratosis.

The Condition Defined

The word actinic describes any type of light that can cause a chemical reaction to occur. The most common “actinic light” however, is *sunlight*. The chemical reaction caused by sunlight includes photosynthesis in plants, but the ultraviolet light (the one we can’t see), also causes a reaction in the epidermis to produce tanning and other skin changes.

The word *keratosis* describes an abnormal growth of the epidermis. Keratin, a protein found in our skin, hair and nails is part of the epidermis. Therefore, *actinic keratosis* means there is a sunlight-induced change in your skin.

What This Really Means

Doctors know that actinic keratosis is an abnormal growth in your epidermis. This occurs as a reaction of excessive exposure to the sunlight’s ultraviolet rays. There is almost never just one but several *keratoses* (which means more than one) that will develop.

They’re most often diagnosed on areas of skin frequently exposed to the sun; particularly the face, ears, lips, bald scalp and also the backs of hands, shoulders and neck.

Why Your Doctor is Concerned

If you have an abnormal skin growth, like actinic keratosis, that is left untreated, it can lead to a type of skin cancer called squamous cell carcinoma. This condition, called a *non-melanoma skin cancer* (NMSC) is one of the two categories of skin cancer that can form in the epidermal layer of your skin. NMSC is very common, typically slow growing, and doesn’t usually spread when treated early. Each year, almost 3 million Americans are diagnosed with NMSC.

A *melanoma* is the other category of skin cancer. This condition

originates in the *melanocytes* – those are cells that produce the pigment *melanin* that cause skin to tan, and freckles or moles to develop. A melanoma has a higher risk of spreading to other parts of the body

Treatments for Actinic Keratosis

Treatments are done in your dermatologist’s office and most commonly include freezing, chemical peel techniques, surgical removal, or a prescription medicine you can apply at home.

Be in Control, Know the Risks, Take Prevention!

Being exposed to ultraviolet light from the sun or tanning beds

increases your risk for developing these lesions-- especially if you are fair skinned with light-colored eyes. However, there are other risk factors as well:

- people with weakened or immune system problems such as HIV/AIDS, or organ transplant
- working outdoors on a regular basis
- being in contact with certain chemicals, such as coal or tar
- taking medicine or having a condition that increases sensitivity to sunlight

Preventive measures should always include protecting your skin when out of doors. Wear a hat to shade your face, gloves, and garments that protect your arms and legs. It’s important to minimize sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. and you should always wear a waterproof UVA and UVB sunscreen.

Learn More!

These trusted resources can provide more information.

<http://www.skincancer.org>

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

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000827.htm>

Actinic Keratosis is a skin condition that occurs as a reaction by your epidermis to excessive exposure of sunlight.

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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