

Diagnosing Skin Cancer (non melanoma)

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'Diagnosing skin cancer (non melanoma)' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there.

If you are looking for information about the skin cancer that develops from abnormal moles (melanoma) this is not the right information for you. In this information there are sections on

- Tests for skin cancer
- Further tests for skin cancer
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

Tests for skin cancer

If you have an abnormal area of skin that you think might be a cancer, you will need to go to your GP first of all. If your GP thinks you may have skin cancer, they will refer you to a specialist for them to look at it more closely.

There can be a wait of a number of weeks to see a specialist, such as a dermatologist (skin specialist). This can be quite unsettling if you are worried that you may have cancer. But the most common type of non melanoma skin cancer, basal cell cancer (BCC), takes years to develop for most people. Waiting a few weeks is unlikely to do any harm.

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If your GP thinks you may have squamous cell cancer (SCC) or a rare type of skin cancer they will make an urgent referral to a specialist and you should be seen within 2 weeks.

Some GPs are specially trained to remove some types of BCC, for example if they are small and in an area that is easy to remove. So you may not always need to be referred to see a specialist at the hospital.

Biopsies to test for skin cancer

It's not always possible to tell the difference between skin cancer and non cancerous skin conditions. So the specialist may take a sample of the abnormal area and send it to the lab to be looked at under a microscope. This is called a biopsy. Usually you have this under a local anaesthetic (you have a drug to numb the area so you can't feel anything).

You will get the results about 2 to 3 weeks after the biopsy was done.

Further tests for skin cancer

Most people with basal cell skin cancer or squamous cell skin cancer will not need these tests. You will only have them if your doctor thinks that your cancer may have spread to nearby lymph nodes (a network of glands found throughout the body) or to another part of the body. For basal cell cancers, this hardly ever happens. For squamous cell cancers, it is unlikely if they have been diagnosed early on.

Types of tests

Your doctor may ask you to have an ultrasound, a CT scan or an MRI scan.

Lymph node biopsy

You may have this test if your doctor thinks there is a possibility that your cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes.

After your tests

You will probably feel very anxious while waiting for your test results. It may help to talk to a close friend or relative about how you are feeling. Or you may want to contact a cancer support group to talk to someone who has been through a similar experience.

What to ask your doctor about diagnosing skin cancer

- I have a funny red patch of skin and am worried it may be cancer. Can you remove it, or will I have to go to hospital?
- Do you often do this type of minor surgery?
- Will you take away a safety margin of healthy tissue around the abnormal skin?
- Should I be referred to a dermatologist?
- How long is the waiting list to see a dermatologist at my local hospital?
- Will I need stitches?
- What will happen if I don't have the abnormal area removed?
- How long will the results take?
- Who will give me the results?
- Am I likely to need any more treatment?
- Will I need to have any more tests?
- Will I have to come for follow up appointments?
- Am I likely to get another skin cancer, now I have had one?
- What should I look for?
- Are any of my family at increased risk of skin cancer?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in September 2014. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2014. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)