

Information for patients

Basal Cell Carcinoma

What is Basal Cell Carcinoma

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common form of skin cancer. Until recently, those most affected were old people, particularly men, who had worked outdoors. The number of new cases has been increasing each year and we now find that the average age of the onset of the disease has steadily decreased.

What causes Basal Cell Carcinomas?

Chronic over-exposure to sunlight is the cause of 95% or all basal cell carcinomas. They occur most frequently on exposed parts of the body, the face, neck, ears, scalp, shoulders and back. In rare cases however, tumours develop on non-exposed areas.

Who Gets Basal Cell Carcinomas?

Whilst anyone with a history of sun exposure can develop basal cell carcinoma, people who are highest risk have fair skin, light hair and blue, green or grey eyes. Workers in occupations that require long hours outdoors and people who spend their leisure time in the sun are particularly susceptible. The disease is

virtually unknown in people under the age of 20, but becomes more and more common with age.

Should I be worried?

Whilst basal cell carcinomas are a form of skin cancer, they are relatively indolent tumours that only very rarely spread to involve other organs. However, they will invariably gradually enlarge and invade and infiltrate local tissues. It is therefore best to get rid of basal cell carcinomas when they are first detected and small i.e. when they are most easily and effectively dealt with.

Treatments

The diagnosis of basal cell carcinoma is usually made by your doctor and may be confirmed by a skin biopsy. Fortunately, there are several effective methods for eradicating basal cell carcinomas. The choice of treatment is based on type, size and location of the tumour and the patient's age and general health.

Treatment can almost always be performed as an out-patient, but occasionally a short stay in hospital is necessary. The types of treatment available include surgical excision, cryotherapy (freezing), cauterisation (heating) and radiotherapy.

What to expect following treatment

The cure rate of basal cell carcinomas is excellent. This type of skin cancer never spreads internally to vital organs. However, if left untreated, it can destroy surrounding tissue and therefore the earlier it is treated the better. All forms of treatment involve some form of scarring, which is unfortunately, inevitable. When small skin cancers are removed, the result is usually cosmetically very acceptable. For larger tumours or those in difficult sites, sometimes plastic surgery involving a skin graft or flap may be required.

Although the cure rate with most forms of basal cell carcinomas is over 90% there is, the possibility of recurrence and if you feel a lump is developing at the site of the treatment, then you should see your doctor again. In addition, once you have had one basal cell carcinoma, you are at a greater risk of developing others in the future and you should therefore check your skin regularly and report any suspicious lesions to your doctor.

Prevention

Avoid sun exposure by wearing a hat and a good sunscreen on bright days.