



How to Check for Skin Cancer

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The best way for you to avoid problems with skin cancer is to recognize and treat them early. We all know this and many of us are aware of some of the changes to look for. However, there are several key changes that I believe are important to recognize.

The most critical symptom to watch for is a change in the size, shape or texture of a lesion on your skin. Spots that were flat can become raised, ones that were stable colored may develop new or irregular coloring, growths that were symmetric may become asymmetric or things that never bothered you may suddenly itch (the body's way of telling you it does not like it) or bleed. If you believe that something on your body is changing, it should be seen in a timely manner by a dermatologist who is Board Certified by The American Board of Dermatology.


Skin cancers come in a few basic varieties and we will discuss what changes to look for with each. The types of skin cancers that are common include squamous cell carcinomas, basal cell carcinomas and melanomas. Less common cancers may arise from the sweat glands or other cells, but these are rare.

Basal cell carcinomas are the most frequent types of skin cancers. Fortunately, they are typically very easy to fix and when they are on the face, may be removed by a dermatologist who will likely use Mohs surgery to map the margins and then reconstruct the defect (yes, you will have a scar when someone removes a skin cancer). My patients usually complain of a "pimple" that won't heal or a spot that bleeds. Recognizing a basal cell carcinoma is usually pretty easy; most are small, waxy bumps that grow in areas that got a lot of sun exposure. Many have small blood vessels that roll over them. Some will simply form erosions on the surface of the skin and, if left untreated, can grow to be quite large. If you notice a spot that is shiny and growing, get it biopsied and discuss your options for treatment with your dermatologist.

Squamous cell carcinomas or their precursors (actinic keratoses) usually appear as scaly, pink or red bumps.

In some instances, they can be large (larger than a quarter) and because they are red and scaly, may be mistaken for a rash (even by experienced dermatologists). The key to recognizing them is to look for areas that don't heal and become more scaly, red or raised. Check your nose, lips, ears and the tops of your arms and hands for these spots. Point them out to your dermatologist. If they are small, they may be sprayed with liquid nitrogen, but when they are thick or large, they are biopsied. If they are squamous cell carcinomas, they are then excised (usually using Mohs surgery if they are on the face).

Checking yourself for a melanoma is very important and it should be done once a month. Additionally, you should be seen from head to toe by a dermatologist (if you are modest, wear a bikini but get checked). Most melanomas are the size of a pencil eraser and have irregular color and border. By that, I mean that they are dark in one area and light in another and that the border, which should be crisp and even, is fuzzy or scalloped. When you are checking yourself, pay attention to spots that itch or that are new. I have had patients come in and tell me that a small mole was not there a year ago or that a mole began to itch. Despite the fact that I did not think they were a concern, I did a biopsy on them because the patient recognized a change. Because the patient pointed these out, I was able to detect the melanomas that were clinically unrecognizable.

Checking yourself for skin cancer is a lot like checking yourself for breast cancer- important and relatively easy. You'll know your body better than anyone and once you are attuned as to what to look for, can help your dermatologist find skin cancers at an early, curable stage. 

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