



Basal cell carcinomas

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) is the most common form of skin cancer and the most frequently occurring form of all cancers. In the US alone, an estimated 3.6 million cases are diagnosed each year.

BCCs arise from abnormal, uncontrolled growth of basal skin cells.

Because BCCs grow slowly, most are curable and cause minimal damage when caught and treated early. Understanding BCC causes, risk factors and warning signs can help you detect them early when they are easiest to treat and cure.

What is a basal cell?

One of the three main types of cells in the top layer of the skin, basal cells shed as new ones form.

BCCs occur when the basal cell is damaged from exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or indoor tanning, which triggers changes in basal cells in the outermost layer of the skin (epidermis), resulting in uncontrolled growth.

It is important to note that BCCs can look quite different from one person to another. Some appear as an open sore that does not heal, some as shiny bumps or nodules, others as a reddish patch or irritated area or a scar-like area that is flat, white, yellow or waxy in colour. Some appear as a small

pink growth with a slightly raised rolled edge and a crusted indentation in the centre.

How dangerous is BCC?

BCCs rarely spread beyond the original tumour site. But these lesions can grow and become disfiguring and dangerous. Untreated BCCs can become locally invasive, grow wide and deep into the skin, and destroy skin, tissue and bone. The longer you wait to get treatment, the more likely it is that the BCC will recur.

BCC risk factors

The following factors increase your BCC risk:

UV exposure from the sun or indoor tanning; a history of skin cancer, including squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) or melanoma; age older than 50; fair skin; male gender; chronic skin infections and skin inflammation from burns; scars or other conditions.

What can you do?

Check your skin monthly for new or changing lesions that grow, bleed or do not heal; perform self-exams and visit your dermatologist regularly.

Protect against UV rays by taking simple, smart protective measures such as seeking shade – especially when the sun is strongest – using a broad-spectrum sunscreen, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and UV-blocking sunglasses.

Treatment

When detected early, most BCCs can be treated and cured. Prompt treatment is vital because, as a tumour grows, it becomes more dangerous and potentially disfiguring, requiring more extensive treatment.

Treatment options include curettage and electrodesiccation, Mohs surgery, excisional surgery, radiation therapy, photodynamic therapy, cryosurgery, laser surgery or topical medications.

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