

Business Insight

Skin Cancer: What Should I Be Looking For?

"How could it be skin cancer? It's not even dark!" These are statements that I hear all too often in my clinic. Unfortunately, many people believe that all skin cancers present as large, dark moles. This can be true when it comes to melanomas, but melanomas only account for about 1% of all skin cancers. The two most common types of skin cancer, basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, present very differently and should be on everyone's radar.

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer in the United States. It often presents as a non-healing sore. These lesions generally look like an open wound with a raised, pearly border. The sores tend to scab over and almost heal before they open up again and restart the healing cycle. Basal cell carcinomas are rarely life-threatening but can become quite large and disfiguring if left untreated. Treatment of these lesions has a very high cure rate if caught early.

Squamous cell carcinoma is the second most common type of skin cancer in the United States. These lesions tend to present as crusty scabs that do not resolve, even with the application of a moisturizer, or they present as red, tender nodules. Much like basal cell carcinomas, cure rates for squamous cell carcinomas are very high if detected early; however, these lesions can spread to other areas of the body and become life threatening if left untreated.

Melanomas, although they are far less common than basal cell or squamous cell carcinomas, are responsible for the majority of skin cancer-related deaths. These cancers arise from the pigment-producing cells of the skin called melanocytes. When assessing pigmented lesions, anything that is asymmetrical, has irregular borders, is very dark in color or has multiple colors in a single lesion requires close evaluation. In some circumstances, these lesions may warrant a biopsy. As a general guideline, any pigmented lesion larger than the eraser on a pencil or that is changing in size or color should be examined by a trained professional.

Skin cancers appear most commonly in areas of sun exposure such as the face, scalp, arms, hands, shoulders and chest, but can

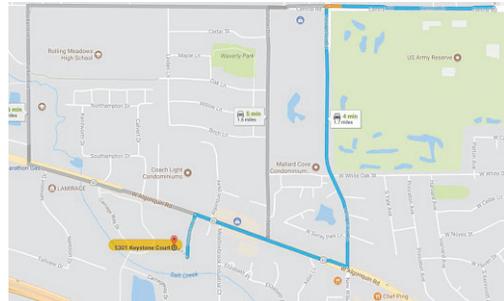


appear anywhere on the body. In general, I tell all of my patients that any lesion that is new, changing, tender or not healing for more than 2-3 weeks should be evaluated by a health care professional. Check your skin regularly for any new or changing spots. Should a question arise, show any suspicious spots to your health care provider or dermatologist.

Early detection is a critical factor in establishing a positive outcome. Your dermatologist is trained to diagnose and treat each form of skin cancer, and he or she can explain the treatment process in greater detail and tailored to your specific medical situation.

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