

Skin Cancer

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Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. More than 500,000 new cases are reported each year-and the incidence is rising faster than any other type of cancer. While skin cancers can be found on any part of the body, about 80 percent appear on the face, head, or neck, where they can be disfiguring as well as dangerous. The primary cause of skin cancer is ultraviolet radiation -most often from the sun, but also from artificial sources like sunlamps and tanning booths. In fact, researchers believe that our quest for the perfect tan, an increase in outdoor activities, and perhaps the thinning of the earth's protective ozone layer are behind the alarming rise we're now seeing in skin cancers.



By far the most common type of skin cancer is basal cell carcinoma. Fortunately, it's also the least dangerous kind--it tends to grow slowly, and rarely spreads beyond its original site. Though basal cell carcinoma is seldom life-threatening, if left untreated it can grow deep beneath the skin and into the underlying tissue and bone, causing serious damage (particularly if it's located near the eye).

Squamous cell carcinoma is the next most common kind of skin cancer, frequently appearing on the lips, face, or ears. It sometimes spreads to distant sites, including lymph nodes and internal organs. Squamous cell carcinoma can become life threatening if it's not treated.

A third form of skin cancer, malignant melanoma, is the least common, but its incidence is increasing rapidly, especially in the Sunbelt states. Malignant melanoma is also the most dangerous type of skin cancer. If discovered early enough, it can be completely cured. If it's not treated quickly, however, malignant melanoma may spread throughout the body and is often deadly.

If you're concerned about skin cancer, your family physician is a good place to start. He or she should examine your skin at your annual physical, and can refer you to a specialist if necessary.

The different techniques used in treating skin cancers can be life saving, but they may leave a patient with less than pleasing cosmetic or functional results. Depending on the location and severity of the cancer, the consequences may range from a small but unsightly scar to permanent changes in facial structures such as your nose, ear, or lip.

In such cases, no matter who performs the initial treatment, the plastic surgeon can be an important part of the treatment team. Reconstructive techniques- ranging from a simple scar revision to a complex transfer of tissue flaps from elsewhere on the body-can often repair damaged tissue, rebuild body parts, and restore most patients to acceptable appearance and function.