

ADVANTAGE

Skin Cancer



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What causes skin cancer?



What are the symptoms?



What is the treatment?



Surgery



Chemotherapy



Radiation Therapy

What are the risk factors?

Family history

Albinism

Low levels of melanin



Questions

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1 What is skin cancer?

People tend to think that skin cancer is one condition, when in fact there are generally 3 major types: melanoma, basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). Melanoma is the most malignant of the three. Skin cancer, like all cancers elsewhere in the body, arises when there is uncontrolled and abnormal growth of normal cells found in the skin. BCC is the most common type.

2 What causes skin cancer?

The most common cause is ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun. We cannot see UV light directly with our eyes, and most of it does not reach us because the atmosphere filters it out. Other than the sun, high exposure to x-rays, immune suppression, and certain chemicals can also induce skin cancer.

3 What are the risk factors?

Anybody can get skin cancer, including indigenous African people. However, some groups are at increased risk and there are known conditions that predispose one to developing the condition. These include:

- Albinism
- Light skin with easy freckling. Having lots of moles, especially from birth, also increases risk
- People with low levels of melanin, i.e. those with light hair and blue or green eyes
- A personal or family history of skin cancer.

4 What are the symptoms?

Generally the offending lesions are in sun-exposed areas, but this is not always the case. There is no one definitive sign that is suggestive of malignancy, however the following are some features that raise suspicion and warrant further investigation by a doctor, preferably a dermatologist:

- A non-healing sore or ulcer
- Progressive and persistent change in size, shape and colour in a skin lesion
- An asymmetrical mole with irregular borders or margins
- Sudden bleeding in a previously existing mole
- New-onset itching and pain in a mole.

5 What is the treatment?

Treatment depends on the type of cancer one has and can involve surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy or a combination of these. Complications depend on the site involved and whether there is metastasis or not. Most of the times the suspicious lesions are detected early, biopsied and managed without the need for prolonged treatment. However there is always a need for careful follow-up.