

Basal Cell Skin Cancer

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common form of skin cancer in Canada. This type of skin cancer fortunately is the least dangerous but must be treated since it will continue to grow, invading and destroying surrounding skin tissue, eventually causing disfigurement.

What does it look like?

Basal cell skin cancers usually appear on sun exposed areas, most commonly the face and neck, but also on the trunk, arms and legs. The appearance of this type of skin cancer can vary.

The early warning signs to look for are:

- A firm, flesh coloured or slightly reddish bump, often with a pearly border. It may have small blood vessels on the surface which gives it a red colour.
- A sore or pimple-like growth that bleeds, crusts over and then reappears. Any sore that does not heal within four weeks should be examined by your dermatologist.
- A small, red scaling patch seen most often on the trunk or limbs.

What causes it?

Ultraviolet radiation from the sun is the prime cause of this skin cancer. Frequent severe sunburns and intense sun exposure in childhood increase the risk of basal cell skin cancer in adulthood.

Who is at risk?

A large group of the population is much more susceptible to getting this form of skin cancer. Studies have shown that fair skinned people with blond or red hair and skin that usually burns when out in the sun are most at risk. The incidence increases as people get older, especially over the age of 50. However, these tumours are now being seen in teenagers and in people in their early twenties. More men get this disease than women. People who have already one basal cell skin cancer will have a higher risk for developing another. Organ transplant patients whose immune systems are compromised also face a higher risk.

How is this cancer treated?

Treatment options depend on the tumour (size, location etc.) and the patient's own health status. Your dermatologist will discuss treatment options with you. Some treatment options are simple surgical excision, curetage, electrodesiccation and cautery, or laser surgery.

New therapies such as photodynamic therapy and immune modulating creams are on the horizon for some forms of this type of skin cancer. For large tumors, recurrent tumors and tumors located near important structures such as the nose or eyes, Mohs surgery is indicated. This is a specialized form of surgery which has a high cure rate, removing just the tumor and sparing the normal skin. This form of surgery is performed by dermatologists specially trained in this technique.