

What is Squamous Cell Carcinoma?

Excessive sun exposure, sun damage, and other factors can cause mutations in skin cells that accumulate to cause actinic keratosis (pre-cancers) and squamous cell carcinoma. Squamous cell carcinoma is the second most common type of skin cancer. These lesions appear scaly, red, and do not go away on their own. They may also bleed or occasionally become painful. Various subtypes of squamous cell carcinomas exist. Some develop superficially while other subtypes grow rapidly and become invasive.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who has been exposed to the sun is at risk. While that category includes all of us, some are more susceptible than others. Light-skinned individuals with blonde hair and colored eyes have the highest risk since they have little pigment protection. The lack of melanin leaves their cell's DNA more vulnerable to sun damage. A tanning history (whether in the tanning bed or outside) and radiation therapy also increases your risk of skin cancer.

Skin damage is cumulative, adding up over the years. Imagine an empty tank under a leaky faucet that slowly releases water droplets. In the beginning, the drops are barely noticeable, but as the years pass by, the tank starts to fill up. At some point, the tank will overflow; enough skin damage has accumulated in the skin's DNA, leading to a skin cancer. It is never too late to start using sunscreen and protecting yourself from the adverse effects of ultraviolet radiation.

Immunocompromised individuals (i.e. organ transplant recipients, undergoing cancer treatment or other immunosuppressive medications) are also more susceptible to squamous cell carcinoma. It is highly recommended that these patients visit their dermatologist for an annual skin screening.

How do I protect myself?

While you may enjoy basking in the sun on a breezy summer day, make sure to take the proper precautions. The main factor in the development of squamous cell carcinoma is ultraviolet (UV) exposure from sunlight. Therefore, the first layer of protection is avoidance.

Peak sunlight hours occur from 10AM to 2PM, during which UV radiation is the strongest. You can enjoy nice weather, but try to venture outside before 10 AM or after PM. Seek the shade when possible.

Your second line of defense is clothing, including a wide-brimmed hat, long sleeves, and pants. Some manufacturers have now started to identify clothing with a UPF (Ultraviolet Protection Factor) rating, similar to sunscreen's SPF (sun protection factor). If possible, choose clothing with a UPF of 50 or above.

Sunscreen is also very important. Apply a cream with an SPF 30 or higher before heading outside. If you stay outside for more than 2 hours, make sure you re-apply every 2 hours. Now enjoy the sunshine!

I'm worried I may have a skin cancer?

Take a deep breath. Chances are, you probably know a relative, friend, or neighbor who had a skin cancer. You may even know someone who passed away from cancer. It is important to recognize that not all skin cancers are the same. Some are less aggressive when caught early, like squamous cell carcinoma. Others, like melanoma or Merkle cell carcinoma, may be more dangerous.

Keep in mind that you may not have a skin cancer. Allow us or another dermatologist to examine the spot for you. You may be reassured the worrisome lesion is benign, or what you may think is nothing (pimple or blemish) may be confirmed by a skin biopsy to be cancerous. It is important to undergo a skin check regularly, especially if you've had a long history of sun exposure or have a personal or family history of skin cancer. If you have had squamous cell carcinoma in the past, your risk of having another one increases. Squamous cell carcinoma is does not usually spread to other organs, especially if treated early.

I was diagnosed with a Squamous Cell Carcinoma, now what?

If the biopsy confirms a squamous cell carcinoma, I will discuss the options with you. Depending the size, location, and aggressiveness (there are many subtypes of squamous cell carcinoma), I will work with you as a team to find the best option to treat it. It may be a topical cream, a surgical procedure, or radiation treatment. The good news is squamous cell carcinomas are highly curable, especially when caught early. The earlier the squamous cell carcinoma is treated, the more likely you can avoid larger surgical scars and local spread.