

SKIN CANCER

"A STITCH IN TIME SAVES NINE"

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If you live in Citrus County, the chances are that you know someone who has had skin cancer and has been cured. Cancer of the skin is the most common form of cancer. Fortunately, it is generally very easy to diagnose, treat, and cure.

Skin cancer is so common in Citrus County because of our high proportion of senior citizens and our high exposure to sunlight. Most skin cancer is caused by prolonged sun exposure in susceptible individuals. Generally the lighter a person's natural skin color, the greater the chance of developing a skin cancer. Irish people have a relatively high incidence; blacks, extremely low. The more sunlight exposure a susceptible person has had, the greater the chance of developing a skin cancer. The skin cancer usually occurs many years, or even decades, after the sun exposure.

By far the most common type of skin cancer is the BASAL CELL CARCINOMA. This type of cancer most often appears on sun-exposed areas like the forehead, face and ears, although it may occur almost anywhere on the body. Fortunately, this type as a rule does not tend to spread to other parts of the body. Typically, it slowly enlarges until it bleeds, gets infected, or ulcerates. If left alone, it will continue to expand and destroy whatever body structure it reaches. SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA and MALIGNANT MELANOMA, unlike Basal Cell Cancer, tend to spread to lymph nodes and even to distant parts of the body as they become advanced. When diagnosed and treated early, however, they are usually not much more dangerous than Basal Cell.

A physician who is experienced in the treatment of skin cancers can generally have a pretty good idea whether a skin lesion is malignant. Accurate diagnosis, however, depends upon examination of the tissue under a microscope. Growths can be biopsied by removing a small sample of the growth or by removing the entire growth for examination.

The mainstay of treatment for almost all skin cancers is surgery. Examination of the removed tissue under the microscope by a pathologist will ensure an accurate diagnosis and confirm that the entire cancer has been removed. In cases where it cannot be known that a tumor has been completely removed, additional skin is removed until it is clear that no additional tumor remains. Since skin cancer most often occurs in older people, who have "excess" skin, skin cancers often can simply be removed and the surrounding skin simply sutured (stitched) back together. In other cases, particularly on the nose, eyelids and ears, reconstructive plastic surgery can generally restore normal body function and appearance. This type of surgery is an art as well as a science. It usually involves moving skin from an adjacent portion of the face to give a good color, thickness and texture match with an absolute minimum of scarring. This type of surgery

is performed with local anesthesia (numbing medication) either in an office or outpatient setting. Healing is generally relatively painless and uneventful.

Do what you can to avoid skin cancer. Avoid direct sun exposure. Stay out of the sun during the hours of the day where the sun's rays are most direct, between 10AM and 2PM. Wear a broad-brimmed hat. Use sunscreen rated at least 15 (the higher the number, the higher the relative protection). Wear a shirt when swimming. Remember that the ultraviolet rays that cause skin damage are present even on a cloudy day.

If you notice a growth that is changing in color, size, or appearance, or one that drains or bleeds, consult a physician for evaluation. When found early, almost all skin cancers can be cured with relatively little difficulty. Generally the smaller the cancer, the smaller the treatment. Indeed . . . wasn't it a cancer surgeon who first said, "A stitch in time saves nine?"