Basal Cell Carcinoma

There are 3 major types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. The outer layer of the skin is made up of squamous cells. Below the squamous cells are the basal cells. Melanocytes, from which melanoma develops, are pigmented (sun-blocking) cells which are found in the lower and mid-level of the outer layer of the skin (epidermis).

Background Information on Basal Cell Carcinoma

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer affecting nearly one million Americans each year. Incidence is higher in men than women, and tends to occur in older individuals, although rates are increasing in young adults and children. Most basal cell skin cancers can be cured, although individuals with these types of cancer have a higher risk for developing other skin cancers. Basal cell carcinoma occurs most frequently as a result of unprotected ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure, either from sunlight or artificial sources such as tanning booths. Some of this exposure may have occurred recently, however, much of it may be due to exposures that happened many years earlier. Although this skin cancer rarely spreads to other organs of the body, it can cause destruction of surrounding tissue. Thus, early detection and treatment are needed.

Early Indicators: It is important to be aware of the marks on your body, including moles, blemishes, freckles, etc. The American Cancer Society recommends checking your skin once a month to monitor any changes in these marks. Pay attention to any new growths, spots or bumps that are getting larger (over a few months or one to two years), or to any sores that don’t heal within three months. Basal cell carcinomas often appear as flat, firm, pale areas or small, raised, pink or red, translucent, shiny, waxy areas that may bleed following minor injury. Basal cell carcinoma may have several different appearances on your skin.

Risk Factors: There are several risk factors that can increase an individual’s likelihood of developing a basal cell carcinoma.

- As mentioned, most basal cell carcinomas are caused by chronic sun exposure.
- Individuals with fair skin and a tendency to burn are at an increased risk of developing some type of skin cancer.
- Exposure to chemicals or radiation.
- Individuals who have had skin cancer previously are at a higher risk for developing it again. These individuals should be screened more frequently.
Treatment Options
Several effective methods are available to treat basal cell carcinoma. Your healthcare provider’s choice of therapy depends on the size, location, and subtype of basal cell carcinoma as well as your age and general health. Most basal cell carcinomas can be completely cured with the appropriate treatment. Only a physician can determine the most appropriate treatment.

Simple Excision: Most cases of basal cell carcinoma can be simply removed (cut out) along with a margin of normal skin.

Mohs Surgery: Mohs surgery, microscopically controlled surgery, is generally used when treating large tumors, tumors in certain critical locations, and those that have come back after other treatments. The cure rate is higher with Mohs surgery than any other type of treatment, however, it is complex and expensive.

Radiation: This is generally the therapy of choice for cancers which are in hard to reach places that are difficult to treat surgically.

Laser Surgery or Topical Chemotherapy: Either of these therapies are appropriate for individuals whose cancers are very superficial tumors.

Protective Measures
There are measures that you can take to reduce your risk for developing skin cancer. It is critical to limit skin exposure to the sun’s harmful rays by wearing sunglasses, broad-brimmed hats, and protective clothing. In addition, the use of a broad-spectrum sunscreen rated SPF-30 or higher on all exposed skin is recommended. Avoiding tanning salons and artificial tanning devices is important as well. Conduct self-examinations and routinely visit your dermatologist for a skin examination.

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider
- Are there any other tests that we need to perform?
- Where is my cancer located and has it spread?
- What treatment do you suggest?
- What are the benefits of this type of treatment?
- What are the risks and side effects of this treatment option?
- What are the steps after treatment?
- What are the chances of recurrence after my treatment plan?

Sources for Additional Information
- American Academy of Dermatology: www.aad.org
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov
- CancerCare: www.cancercare.org

The content on this handout is provided to you as general information and not intended as a diagnosis. Please consult with your physician regarding the essential details about your condition.