

Tests and Procedures to Find and Treat Skin Cancer

Anyone can get skin cancer. Many spots people find on their skin are not cancer, but some might be cancer or pre-cancer. Skin cancers can often be found early when they may be easier to treat.

If you notice a change in your skin, your doctor will need to do an exam to check it. If the change looks like it might be cancer, your doctor will need to do a test or procedure to find out if it is cancer. And if you have skin cancer, your doctor may use a procedure to treat it.



Tests to Find Skin Cancer

A biopsy is done to check for cancer. A skin biopsy is a minor surgery where a part (sample) of a spot that might be cancer is removed. The sample is sent to a lab and looked at under a microscope to see if there are cancer cells.

The kind of biopsy your doctor needs to do depends on the type of skin cancer it might be. The doctor also looks at the size of the area and where it is on your body to help decide what biopsy to do. Your skin will be numbed so you don't have pain during the biopsy. You will be told how to care for the biopsy site afterward.

Shave biopsy: The doctor shaves off the top layers of skin with a blade. An ointment, chemical, or small electrical current will be used to stop any bleeding.

Punch biopsy: A tool that looks like a tiny round cookie cutter is used to remove a deeper sample. The edges of the biopsy site are often stitched together.

Excisional and incisional biopsy: The doctor uses a surgical knife to cut deeper into the skin. A wedge of skin is removed. The edges of the biopsy site are usually stitched together. An excisional biopsy removes the whole tumor. An incisional biopsy only removes a part of the tumor.

Lymph node biopsy: It's not common for some skin cancers to spread, but it is possible. A lymph node biopsy might be done to see if cancer has spread to your nearby lymph nodes. This biopsy is more involved than those that remove the spot. It may be done using a very thin needle. Or the doctor may decide to remove the whole lymph node.



Procedures to Treat Skin Cancer

There are different procedures that might be used to treat skin cancer. The procedure used depends on the type, size, and location of the skin cancer. Your skin will be numbed so you don't have pain during the procedure. You will be told how to care for the treatment site afterward.

Excision: For this procedure, the cancer and some normal skin around it are cut out with a surgical knife. Sometimes, the edges of the skin are stitched back together, but this depends on how big the cut needs to be.

Curettage and electrodesiccation: The cancer is removed by scraping it with a long, thin tool. The area is then treated with an electric needle to destroy any cancer cells that might be left.

Mohs surgery: The doctor removes thin layers of the skin one at a time. Each layer is looked at under a microscope. If cancer is seen, then another layer of skin is removed. This is repeated until no cancer cells are seen. This procedure is used when there is a high risk the skin cancer will come back after treatment. It is also used when the doctor isn't sure how much skin cancer there is. And it may be used to keep as much healthy skin as possible for cancers near certain areas like the eye, middle of the face, ears, or fingers. Stitches might be needed after the procedure to help the area heal.

Skin grafts: If a large skin cancer is removed by surgery, there may not be enough nearby skin left to stitch the wound together. In these cases, skin can be taken from another part of the body (graft) to cover the wound and help it heal. Skin grafts may also make the area look better.

These procedures are just some of the ways to treat skin cancer. Your doctor may also want you to get other types of treatment, such as immunotherapy, targeted therapy, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy. Treatment will depend on the type of skin cancer you have, how big and deep it is, and if it has spread to other parts of your body.

Talk to your health care team about what is best for you.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **www.cancer.org/skincancer**.

We're here when you need us.

