



# After a Skin Cancer Diagnosis



If you have been told you have skin cancer, you've probably already had exams and a biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have scans or tests based on the type of skin cancer you have. These tests help your doctor know what treatment might help.

## Types of skin cancer

There are many types of skin cancer. It's important to understand the type you have to know what to expect.

**Basal cell and squamous cell skin cancer** are the 2 most common types of skin cancer. They are usually not serious because they don't often spread to other parts of the body. They also usually respond well to treatment.

- Basal cell skin cancer starts in the lower layer of the skin.
- Squamous cell skin cancer starts in the top layer of the skin.

**Melanoma** is a less common type of skin cancer. It starts in the cells that give skin its color (pigment). Melanoma is more serious because it is more likely to spread to other parts of the body. Melanoma causes almost all skin cancer deaths because it can spread quickly.

## Treatment for skin cancer

When found early, most skin cancers can be removed with minor surgery right in your doctor's office. Other treatments can sometimes be applied directly to your skin. For skin cancers that have spread, radiation and medicines such as chemo, targeted drug therapy, or immunotherapy might be used.

Your treatment will depend on the type and stage of your skin cancer. Your treatment options will also depend on the results of tests on the cancer cells, your health, and your personal preferences. Your doctor will help you decide which treatments are best for you.

## Be sure to ask:

- What is the goal of treatment?
- What type of skin cancer do I have?

- What stage is my skin cancer, and what does that mean?
- What else have you learned from my test results?
- Do I need surgery? If so, how will the areas look after surgery?
- Will I need more tests?

## What to expect before and during treatment

Most skin cancers are treated with minor surgery or skin treatments given by a dermatologist (skin doctor). Some skin cancers are treated at a cancer center, especially if more treatment is needed or if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body. Your doctor and their team will explain your treatment and how it is given. They will help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you manage any side effects.

Not everyone going through treatment for skin cancer will have the same side effects. For example, side effects of having surgery on your skin are different from side effects of chemo, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation. And people getting the same treatment might have different side effects.

## Be sure to ask:

- Do I need treatment besides surgery?
- Are there any clinical trials for my type of cancer?
- What side effects might I have, and what can I do about them?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will I go to get treatment? Can I drive myself?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities, like work and exercise?
- Will I have scars? Will I look or feel different?
- Should I take special care to avoid sun exposure?

## What to expect after treatment

After treatment, your doctor will watch you closely. They will do skin exams to check if your cancer has come back or if a new cancer has started in a different part of your body. They will also help you manage any side effects.

For some people, the cancer might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will still be needed to see how well it's working.

You might be faced with changes to your body after treatment. Depending on the size, type, and location of the cancer, your skin may have scars or other changes. Be sure to ask the doctor what to expect and let them know if you have any problems.

People who have had skin cancer are at higher risk of getting another skin cancer. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it is important to ask your doctor about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your skin cancer has come back.

### Be sure to ask:

- Where can I get a copy of my treatment summary?
- How often do I need to see you? When and how should I contact you?
- Will I need tests to see if my cancer has come back, or to check for problems from my treatment?
- Do I need a follow-up plan after treatment?
- Are there late or long-term side effects from treatment that I should watch for?
- Where can I find my medical records after treatment?

## Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your doctor if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms. There are things you can do to keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. It's important to check your skin often for changes. Have a friend or family member help you look at areas that are hard to see by yourself. Tell your doctor if you notice anything different. Make sure to protect your skin when you are outside. Stay in the shade as much as possible. Use sunscreen and cover exposed skin. Remember to do this all year long when you're outside. Avoid tanning beds, too. Eating well, getting to and staying at a healthy weight, not smoking, drinking enough fluids, and being active can also help keep you healthy.

## Dealing with your feelings

Having skin cancer might make you feel scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them.

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about them, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your doctor know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, continue doing things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling can also help. Some people find it helpful to talk with others who've been through the same things. A support group can offer that. Tell your doctor how you're feeling. They can help you find the right support.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org/skincancer](https://cancer.org/skincancer) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.