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What is a basal cell carcinoma?

Basal cell carcinoma is a locally destructive skin cancer and is the most common form of skin cancer. It destroys by extending inward from where it starts. It does not spread through the body by means of the blood stream or the lymphatics like most cancers, therefore its growth is slow but relentless and eventually will cause death if not removed surgically.

Where do they usually occur?

Basal cell tumors usually occur one at a time. They occur most often on the face between the upper lip and the eyebrows; however, they may occur on any part of the skin. They are more frequent in sun-exposed individuals. Occurrence after radiation therapy is common. Tanning beds are an increasing cause of basal cell cancer. When they occur in young people, it is a more serious situation and indicates a trend for the future since people with one basal cell cancer have a greater risk of developing others.

A person who has several of these tumors should be checked to see if there are cysts of the jaw, unusual formations of the ribs (detected by x-ray) or other findings that indicate the basal cell nevus syndrome. Fortunately it is an extremely rare problem.

How can they be recognized?

Small basal cell tumors are often easily recognized. They are firm, shiny, ivory-colored, button-like lesions. There is a central depression, which may be pink or crusted. The entire lesion can be slightly raised. Patients frequently seek medical attention because the tumor bleeds after minimal trauma.

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How are they removed?

Basal cell tumors may be removed in a variety of ways. Surgical excision, immune modulation therapy, curettage (surgical scraping) and Moh's surgery are all effective and satisfactory. The dermatologist has training in all these methods of treatment and can select the one most appropriate for the individual situation.

How often will the area be checked afterwards?

After one of these tumors has been removed, patients return for follow-up evaluation of the scar usually every three months during the first two years after treatment. It is in this time that most recurrences take place at the same site. The overall surgical cure rate is 95%.

How can I avoid getting basal cells?

Avoiding sun-exposure with hats and sun protective clothing and use of topical antioxidants such as topical Vitamin C, Vitamin E, and Retin-A (prescription required) are methods that have shown efficacy in the prevention of basal cell carcinoma.