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Monthly Self Exam of Skin

A new or changing lesion needs a professional evaluation
Most Skin Cancers can be cured especially if identified at an early stage
Biopsy and Removal of suspicious Lesions is a simple office procedure that can be life saving
Pathology evaluation is the only 100% sure way of diagnosing skin cancer

We recommend monthly home skin cancer screening examinations. We also suggest a once a year office examination if you have had a previous skin cancer, pre-cancer or a family history of skin cancer. For self examination you will need a bright light and a mirror, full length if possible. Ask a friend or family member to assist. You are looking for appearance of new lesions or spots that have changed. Most skin cancers have no symptoms! Not everything that changes is bad but need to be checked. A new or changing lesion needs a professional evaluation. For more information about skin cancer, check out the American Academy of Dermatology website: www.aad.org.

Malignant Melanoma usually starts as a flat dark dot on the skin. Because it is a malignancy, it has uncontrolled growth and will keep getting bigger overtime without stopping. This growth may be either very slow (especially on palms and soles) or quite rapid. Melanomas usually expand flat on the skin before they start growing up and down. The margins may become diffuse, irregular and asymmetrical. The spot may have a mixture colors including red, white and blue in addition to brown or black. Melanomas may grow on ANY place of the body, not just sun exposed skin. They may also develop on soft tissue such as in the eyes, mouth or genitals.

Basal Cell Carcinoma is the most common skin cancer occurring 80% of the time on the skin that has had significant sun exposure. However, the 20% of the time they can start where the sun never reaches. They usually start as tiny flesh colored bumps that continue to grow in size. They may look pearly with some blood vessels on top. As they continue to grow they ulcerate and bleed.

Squamous Cell Carcinoma is the second most common skin cancer. They usually start as precancerous actinic keratosis. Over time, they become thicker, crusty and may bleed. Occasionally, the lesions may develop quite quickly. Like basal cell carcinoma, they are more frequently found on sun exposed skin, but they may grow any place on the body.

Actinic Keratoses are pre-cancers. They usually start out as small pink patches with superficial scale that look like dry skin spots. However, they continue to slowly grow in size, stay persistent over one month and do not resolve with moisturizers. On the lips they may look like persistent chapped skin. If untreated, these pre-cancers may progress to the skin cancer squamous cell carcinoma.

Normal Moles do not become cancerous with irritation or injury. Moles are uncommon at birth, but start as tiny dots in childhood, teens or early adulthood. When we become older adults the moles may become larger or darker in response to hormones or pregnancy. Sometimes the moles may become lighter or slightly more elevated. If we reach our 80's or 90's our moles may go away. Normal moles really do change over time, but do not have the uncontrolled growth of cancer.

Seborrheic Keratoses are non-cancerous spots that occur on adult skin. Although they tend to run in families, most of us will get at least a few spots. They are more common sun-exposed skin and in areas of friction. Unfortunately, these spots may be confused with malignancies since they tend to increase in size (both diameter and thickness) and may be dark in color. The lesions may be removed for cosmetic purposes or if there is any question of the diagnosis.

Cherry "Moles" are really blood vessel overgrowths. Medically they are called "hemangiomas." They also run in families and may range from tiny pink/red dots to elevated purple bumps. They have sharp margins and are almost always distinct circles or ovals at the base. They may be removed if they are bothersome or if they are a cosmetic nuisance, but they are not malignant.

Skin Tags are also non-cancerous growths on adult skin. They may run in families and occur frequently around the neck, under the breasts and in the armpit or groin areas. They are usually flesh colored papules on a thin stalk. If they get to be a cosmetic problem they can be removed, but they don't become cancerous. (Prepared by RxDerm Colleagues-2009)