

The Alternative to Surgery for Skin Cancers

Skin cancers fall into generally 3 main groups. Melanomas for which surgery is almost always required, Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCC) and Squamous Cell Carcinomas (SCC). These latter 2 types occur frequently in Australia and it is estimated that at least 2 of every 3 Australians will get at least one in their lifetime.

The key to success is identifying these tumours as early as possible when they might be thin and small. Larger skin cancers will usually require some type of surgery although radiotherapy is sometimes a good alternative.

In recent years I have been involved in the development and use of newer techniques and treatments, which can allow appropriate treatment of thin, skin cancers without the need for the scalpel.

Superficial BCCs appear to be pink scaly patches on the skin, often found on the face or trunk. A scar is the outcome most people fear and so some people delay seeing their doctors and in particular their dermatologists. Although there are excellent techniques for avoiding nasty scars when operating, using alternative means to remove the problem is now a real possibility.

Photodynamic Therapy, or PDT is a technique in which a cream is applied to the skin in the location where the skin cancer is found. The area is then covered to protect it from the light for a period of 3 hours. In this time, the drug in the cream (called amino levulinic acid) is taken up by abnormal cells of the skin cancer. The abnormal cells absorb it selectively which means normal cells don't concentrate much of the chemical. After 3 hours the patient returns to the dermatologist and a very bright red light is used to trigger a reaction. The chemical reaction destroys the cell and as it is selective to the cancer cells as it leaves the normal skin cells alone.

A patient may experience some stinging and discomfort and the skin becomes a little swollen and then crusty. It heals up in about 1 week with usually excellent cosmetic results. Two treatments are normally required.

Imiquimod is another treatment where cream is applied directly to the skin cancer. The patient is required to buy the cream and apply it regularly to the skin cancer for about 4 to 6 weeks. A brisk red and scabby reaction occurs which can extend beyond the treatment site, as the drug stimulates the body's own immune system to seek out and destroy the cancer cells. In most cases this settles within a couple of weeks after the treatment is complete. Once again, the cosmetic outcome is very good.

In both treatments, the chance of complete removal of the skin cancer is about 80%, which is less than surgery (about 90 to 95%). However surgery can be pursued if these techniques fail.

These treatments have been available over the past 4 or 5 years and have become far more popular. We are currently studying newer therapies to remove early skin cancers without the need for surgery in our region of Sydney.

Dermatologists are doctors who specialize in these and other treatments of skin cancers and are recognized by the qualification FACD.

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