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Care after Skin Cancer Surgery

Once the sutures are removed, after your skin cancer surgery, the incision line is generally red and bumpy. This should resolve within 2 to 3 months. You may also notice bruising and swelling in the area. If you have concerns beyond this please call and schedule an appointment to discuss additional treatment options.

The skin cancer you had removed is gone and should not come back. However, you are at high risk to get another new skin cancer at a separate site. This risk is 50% within 5 years with basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma; with melanoma the risk is 12-14%.

We will want to see you for regular skin examinations to treat any precancerous lesions that develop and if you get another skin cancer, treat it as early as possible. We will schedule you every 3 months for the first two years, and then every 6 months for 5 years, and once a year thereafter.

Sun Protection Recommendations

If you have had a skin cancer, precancers (actinic keratosis), or have many atypical moles then it is very important for you to practice sun safety and protect your skin. The sun damage that you have accumulated over the course of your lifetime will always be there and cannot be reversed, but there are many good studies that demonstrate that starting sunscreen use at any age can reduce further risk of skin cancer. The chances of developing an additional skin cancer within 5 years of the first skin cancer is 50%. Sun safety and sun protection can decrease your chances of developing further problems.

1. Sunscreen- If you are going to be outside for more than 20 or 30 minutes you should apply sunscreen of SPF number 15 or higher. Sunscreen only lasts 2-3 hours and should be reapplied every 2 hours if you are spending the day in the sun. Also sunscreen is not "waterproof" even if it says so on the bottle—if you go swimming you need to reapply sunscreen after you come out of the pool.
2. Protective Clothing- Wearing a broad brimmed hat protects most of your face, ears, and neck. Keeping your shirt on also helps to protect your shoulders and back. Baseball hats only protect your forehead and aren't very good protection.
3. Daily Sunscreen Moisturizer- There are many very nice daily sunscreen moisturizers with SPF 15 available. They all rub in well and do not leave you with a greasy feeling like the thicker sunscreens. It is a very good habit to get into to use them on a daily basis all year round. UVA light which is a major factor in causing skin cancer and aging of the skin is present all year round from morning to evening at a relatively constant level. UVA doesn't cause burning so we commonly don't think about the damage it causes.

Most important of all be sure to live your life, do things that you want to, and be happy. We don't want people to avoid outdoor activities—just be smart and protect yourself when you are enjoying the outdoors. If you have had a skin cancer, pre-cancers, or atypical moles then, in addition to your regular dermatologist check ups, be sure to check yourself on a monthly basis for spots that are growing, bleeding, get a scab on them, or are changing in any way. Skin cancers are always easier to take off when they are little than when they are big.