

Patient Information Leaflet: Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC)

What is Squamous Cell Carcinoma?

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is a type of skin cancer that originates in the squamous cells, which are flat cells located in the outer layer of the skin (epidermis). SCC is usually found on areas of the skin that have been exposed to sunlight, such as the face, ears, neck, hands, and arms, but it can also appear in other locations, including the mucous membranes (like the tongue, mouth and lips).

Causes:

The primary cause of squamous cell carcinoma is prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Other factors contributing to the development of SCC include:

- **Tanning Beds:** Use of indoor tanning equipment that emits UV radiation.
- **Fair Skin:** Individuals with lighter skin types are at higher risk.
- **History of Sunburn:** Previous severe sunburn, especially during childhood, increase risk.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Conditions or medications that compromise the immune system can increase the risk of SCC.
- **Chronic Skin Injuries:** Long-term skin damage from burns, scars, or ulcers can lead to SCC.
- **Certain Viruses:** Infection with human papillomavirus (HPV) can contribute to the development of SCC.

Symptoms:

Squamous cell carcinoma may present in a variety of ways, including:

- A growing nodule with a hard keratin centre.
- A firm, red bump on the skin.
- Scaly, crusted patches that may bleed or become ulcerated.
- A sore that does not heal or heals and reopens.

Diagnosis:

SCC is typically diagnosed through a physical examination by a dermatologist, who may assess the appearance of the skin lesion. To confirm the diagnosis, a skin biopsy may be performed, where a small sample of the affected skin is removed and analysed under a microscope.

Treatment Options:

The treatment for squamous cell carcinoma depends on various factors, including the size, location, depth of invasion, and whether the cancer has spread. Common treatment options include:

1. **Topical Treatments:**
 - Medications such as 5-fluorouracil or imiquimod may be used for pre-cancerous lesions such as Bowen's disease.
2. **Curettage and Cautery:**
 - The cancerous lesion is scraped away, and a small electric current is used to destroy any remaining cancerous cells.
3. **Surgical Excision:**
 - The tumour and some surrounding healthy tissue are surgically removed to ensure complete removal of cancerous cells.
4. **Mohs Micrographic Surgery:**

Experts in Skin & Hair

- A specialized surgical technique that meticulously removes cancerous tissue layer by layer, minimising damage to surrounding healthy skin. This is especially useful for tumours located in sensitive areas (e.g. the face).
5. **Radiation Therapy:**
- May be recommended for patients who cannot undergo surgery or for cancers located in areas where surgery may be difficult.

Prevention:

To reduce the risk of developing squamous cell carcinoma:

- **Sun Protection:** Use sunscreen with SPF 50 or higher, wear protective clothing, and avoid sun exposure during peak hours (11am to 3 pm).
- **Avoid Tanning Beds:** Steer clear of indoor tanning to minimise UV exposure.
- **Regular Skin Checks:** Perform regular self-examinations of your skin and have annual check-ups with a dermatologist for early detection and monitoring.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you notice any new or changing spots on your skin, including new growths, changes in existing moles, or sores that do not heal.
- If you experience any symptoms associated with your skin or other lesions that are concerning.

Conclusion:

Squamous cell carcinoma is a common form of skin cancer that can be effectively treated when detected early. By taking preventive measures and staying vigilant about changes in your skin, you can reduce your risk and ensure early intervention if necessary.

If you have questions or concerns about squamous cell carcinoma or your treatment options, please consult your dermatologist.

