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Patient Information Leaflet: Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCCs)

What is Basal Cell Carcinoma?

Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC) is the most common type of skin cancer, originating in the basal cells, which are located in the outer layer of the skin (epidermis). BCCs typically develop in areas of the skin that are frequently exposed to sunlight, such as the face, ears, neck, and scalp. While BCCs are rarely life-threatening, they can be locally invasive and may cause significant damage to surrounding tissues if not treated.

Causes:

The primary cause of BCC is prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Other contributing factors may include:

- **Fair Skin:** Individuals with lighter skin types are at higher risk.
- **History of Sunburn:** Previous severe sunburn, especially during childhood.
- **Tanning Beds:** Use of indoor tanning equipment increases risk.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Individuals with a compromised immune system are at greater risk.
- **Genetic Conditions:** Certain genetic disorders, such as Gorlin syndrome, can predispose individuals to develop BCCs.

Symptoms:

Basal cell carcinomas can present in various forms, and symptoms may include:

- A pearly or waxy bump on the skin, often pink or skin-coloured.
- A flat, reddish patch of skin that may crust or bleed.
- A new growth or sore that does not heal or heals and then reopens.
- A scar-like area that is white, yellow, or waxy.
- Itching, tenderness, or bleeding in the lesions.

Diagnosis:

A dermatologist can usually diagnose BCC through a physical examination and by assessing the appearance of the skin lesion clinically and with dermoscopy (magnification and polarizing light). To confirm the diagnosis, a skin biopsy may be performed, where a small sample of the suspicious skin is removed and analysed under a microscope.

Treatment Options:

Treatment for basal cell carcinoma depends on several factors, including the size, depth, and location of the cancer, as well as the patient's overall health. Common treatment options include:

1. **Topical Medications:**
 - Creams or gels containing medications, such as 5-fluorouracil or imiquimod, may be prescribed for superficial BCCs.
2. **Curettage and Cautery:**
 - The cancerous tissue is scraped away with a curette, followed by the application of an electric current to destroy any remaining cancer cells.
3. **Photodynamic Therapy:**
 - A light-sensitive drug is applied to the cancerous area, which is then exposed to specific wavelengths of light to destroy the cancer cells.

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4. **Excisional Surgery:**
 - The tumour is surgically removed along with a margin of healthy skin surrounding it. This is typically used for the majority of BCCs.
5. **Mohs Micrographic Surgery:**
 - A specialised surgical technique that removes the cancerous tissue layer by layer while preserving as much healthy skin as possible. This is particularly effective for BCCs in cosmetically sensitive areas, such as around the eyes and the nose.
6. **Radiation Therapy:**
 - May be recommended for patients who cannot undergo surgery or for BCCs that are difficult to remove.

Prevention:

To reduce the risk of developing basal cell carcinoma:

- **Sun Protection:** Use sunscreen with SPF 50 or higher, wear protective clothing, and limit sun exposure, especially during peak hours (11 am to 3 pm).
- **Avoid Tanning Beds:** Refrain from using indoor tanning facilities.
- **Regular Skin Checks:** Conduct self-examinations of your skin and have regular check-ups with a dermatologist for early detection.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you notice any new changes to 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 any lesions that are concerning.

Conclusion:

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common form of skin cancer, but with early detection and appropriate treatment, it can be effectively managed. Regular skin monitoring and protective measures play a crucial role in prevention.

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

