

How to examine yourself after treatment for a skin cancer

Introduction

This booklet is designed to give you information about examining yourself following your treatment for a skin cancer. We hope it will answer some of the questions that you or those who care for you may have at this time. It does not replace the discussion between you and your doctor but helps you to understand more about what is discussed.

Why should I self-examine?

There is a small chance that your skin cancer may return close to the original site or spread to another part of your body. Learning how to examine yourself for any sign of the cancer coming back is probably the single most important thing you can do. If the cancer does return, it may still be treatable, if it is caught early. This is why it is important for you to examine yourself between follow-up appointments.

How likely is it that the skin cancer will return?

The risk of a skin cancer returning, or spreading to another part of the body varies from patient to patient. However, it is estimated that between 10 and 20% of patients who have had a skin cancer treated will need some further treatment for the condition. Your doctor will give you more information about the risks in your particular case.

What do I need to look for?

When skin cancers return, they usually appear as lumps beneath the skin. Often if it returns it could be at the original site, or it could have spread to any other part of the body. You should, therefore, ensure that you examine your lymph nodes for signs of skin cancer. These act as a first line of defence against infections.

Lymph nodes are glands and include the ones you feel as a swelling in your neck when you have a sore throat. They are found throughout your body, but the main sites are in your groin, your neck and your armpits.

The lumps which could indicate skin cancer do not usually look like the original cancer, and the lump will probably be the same colour as the surrounding skin. Occasionally it is blue/brown/black/red and on the skin's surface. Any recurrence will feel different from the surrounding skin; it often feels like a dried pea, marble or a hard, round, smooth nodule.

Where should I examine?

There are four areas that need to be carefully checked:

- The scar at the original site of the skin cancer
- The skin around this area
- The skin between the scar and the lymph nodes
- The lymph nodes themselves

How often should I examine myself?

You should check these areas every two weeks. Examining yourself more frequently does not necessarily mean you would be more likely to notice any sign of recurrence and can increase your anxiety.

How should I examine myself?

Start by feeling carefully in and around the scar. You do this by pressing firmly on the skin, and rolling the skin against the underlying muscle. This tends to make any new lumps easier to feel. Use the same method to check the skin between the scar and the lymph nodes, and the lymph nodes themselves.

Where are the lymph nodes?

Lymph nodes are found all over the body but the ones you need to be aware of are likely to be in the groin, armpits or neck. Your doctor or nurse will give you any help and advice that you need on how to examine yourself and how to find your lymph nodes. They will tell you which areas you need to check.

When examining your lymph nodes, it is often useful to compare one side with the other. If you are finding it difficult to examine some areas then it is a good idea to ask someone to help you; maybe a family member or a friend. You can also ask the nurse at your GP's surgery to help examine you if there is nobody you can ask.

Lymph nodes do change in size for reasons other than a spread of cancer – for instance the lymph nodes in your neck may become swollen and perhaps tender if you have a sore throat.

What should I do if I am worried?

If you notice any new lumps when checking you should contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist on 0121 371 6777. It is likely that a review appointment will be made at the hospital within 1–2 weeks. It is important that you are seen quickly so that if your cancer has returned treatment options can be discussed with you, but also because if it is a harmless lump you have found you can be reassured about this. Occasionally you may be asked to see your GP for review rather than coming to the hospital.

Local sources of further information

You can visit any of the health/cancer information centres listed below:

University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

The Patrick Room, Cancer Centre,
Heritage Building (Queen Elizabeth Hospital),
Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TH.
Tel: 0121 371 3537/ 3539

Health Information Centre, Birmingham
Heartlands Hospital, Bordesley Green,
Birmingham, B9 5SS.
Telephone: 0121 424 2280

Information for Patients

Cancer Information and Support Centre

Good Hope Hospital, Rectory Road,
Sutton Coldfield, B75 7RR.
Telephone: 0121 424 9946

Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust

The Courtyard Centre, Sandwell General Hospital (Main Reception),
Lyndon, West Bromwich, B71 4HJ.
Telephone: 0121 507 3792

Walsall Primary Care Trust

Cancer Information & Support Services,
Challenge Building, Hatherton Street,
Walsall, WS1 1YB.
Freephone: 0800 783 9050

About this information

This guide is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Every effort is taken to ensure that this information is accurate and consistent with current knowledge and practice at the time of publication.

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