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If You Have Basal or Squamous Cell Skin Cancer

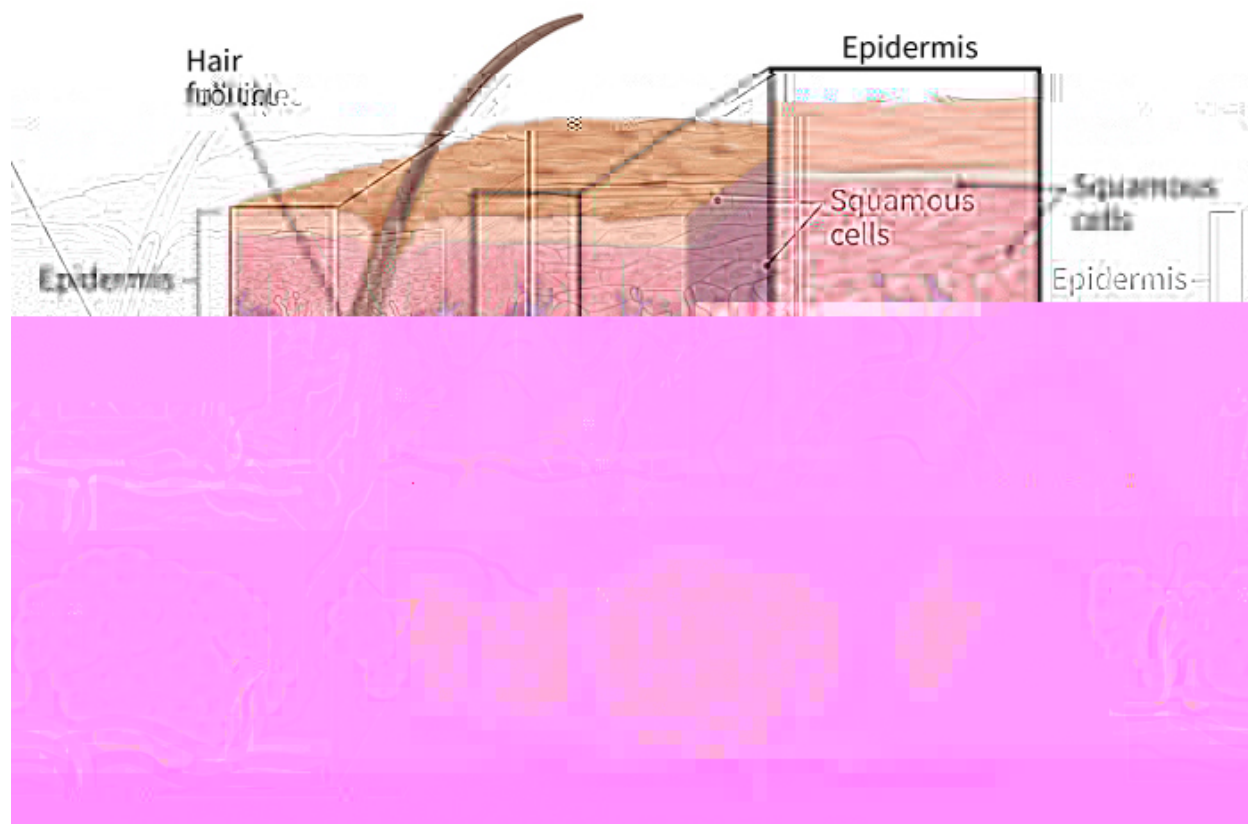
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What are basal and squamous cell skin cancers?

Basal cell skin cancer and squamous cell skin cancer are the two most common types of skin cancer.

The skin is the largest organ in the body. It helps keep the body warm, protects the rest of the body from the sun, covers organs inside the body, guards against germs, and helps make vitamin D.

Your skin is made up of several different layers and many different types of cells. Skin cancer starts when some of these cells begin to grow out of control.



The skin

Ask your doctor to use this picture to show you what layer of skin your cancer started in. The type of skin cancer you have depends on which layer and type of cells the cancer started from.

- **Basal cell** cancer starts in a lower layer of the skin
- **Squamous cell** cancer starts in the top layer of the skin

Your doctor can tell you more about the type of skin cancer you have.

For some types of skin cancer, the cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body, but this doesn't happen often for basal cell and squamous cell cancers. When cancer cells do spread, it's called **metastasis**.

Other types of skin cancer

Another type of skin cancer is **melanoma**. This cancer starts from the pigment-making cells of the skin (called melanocytes). Melanoma is less common than basal and

In a biopsy, the doctor removes the abnormal area of skin to check it for cancer cells. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if you have skin cancer and what kind it is.

There are many types of skin biopsies. Ask your doctor what kind you will need. Each type has pros and cons. The choice of which type to use depends on your own case.

Other tests

In rare cases basal and squamous cell skin cancer can spread to the nearby [lymph nodes](#)³ (bean-size sacs of immune system cells.) Ask your doctor if your lymph nodes will be tested.

Basal and squamous cell cancers don't often spread to other parts of the body. But if your doctor thinks your skin cancer might spread, you might need imaging tests, such as an MRI or CT scan.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Will I need any other tests?
- If so, who will do these tests? Where will they be done?
- How and when will I get the results?
- Who will explain the results to me?
- What do I need to do next?

How serious is my cancer?

For most types of cancer, the doctor will want to find out how far it has spread. This is called [staging](#)⁴.

But basal and squamous cell skin cancers don't spread as often as most other types of cancer, so the exact stage might not be too important. Still, your doctor might want to find out the stage of your cancer to help decide what type of treatment is best for you.

Other things can also help you and your doctor decide how to treat your cancer, such as:

- Where the cancer is on your body
- How fast the cancer has been growing
- If the cancer is causing symptoms, such as being painful or itchy

- If the cancer is new or if it's come back
- If the cancer is in a place that was already treated with radiation
- If you have a weakened immune system

Your doctor might look at these things (and others) to help decide which [risk group](#)⁵ your skin cancer falls into. This can help show how likely it is that your skin cancer will come back. This might affect your treatment options.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Do we need to know the stage of my cancer?
- Do we need to know the risk group of my cancer?
- What do these mean for me?
- What will happen next?

What kind of treatment will I need?

There are many [ways to treat skin cancer](#)⁶. The main types of treatment are:

- Surgery
- Radiation

Surgery

[Surgery](#)⁷ is the main type of treatment for most skin cancers. Most basal and squamous cell skin cancers can be removed quickly and easily with a simple surgery done in the doctor's office using medicine to numb the skin (local anesthetic). There are different types of surgery to remove skin cancer. The type that's best for you depends on the type of skin cancer you have, how big it is, and where it is. Ask your doctor what kind of surgery you will have and what to expect.

Side effects of surgery

Any type of surgery can have risks and side effects. Skin cancer surgery can also often leave a scar where the cancer was removed. Be sure to ask the doctor what you can expect. If you have problems, let your doctors know. Doctors who treat skin cancer should be able to help you with any problems that come up.

Radiation treatments

[Radiation](#)⁸ uses high-energy rays (like x-rays) to kill cancer cells. The kinds of radiation used to treat skin cancer only go into the skin. This limits damage to other parts of the body.

Radiation can also be used to treat skin cancer that has spread to other parts of the body.

Side effects of radiation treatments

If your doctor suggests radiation treatment, ask about what side effects might happen. The most common side effects of radiation are:

- Skin changes and hair loss where the radiation is given
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)

Most side effects get better after treatment ends, but some might last longer. Talk to your cancer care team about what you can expect.

Other local treatments (treatments that affect only the skin)

There are [ways to treat skin cancer without cutting into the skin](#)⁹. Some of these use freezing, chemo or other drugs put right on the skin, light therapy (PDT), or lasers to kill

What about other treatments that I hear about?

When you have cancer you might hear about other ways to treat the cancer or treat your symptoms that are not standard medical treatments. These treatments may be [vitamins, herbs, special diets, and other things](#)¹⁴. You may wonder about these treatments.

Some of these are known to help, but many have not been tested. Some have been shown not to help. A few have even been found to be harmful. Talk to your doctor about anything you're thinking about using, whether it's a vitamin, a diet, or anything else.

Questions to ask the doctor

- Will I need any other tests before we can decide on treatment?
- Do I need to see any other doctors?
- What treatment do you think is best for me?
- What's the goal of this treatment? Do you think it could cure the cancer?
- What will treatment be like? Where will it be done? How long will it take?
- Will I be OK if the cancer is just removed with no other treatment?
- What side effects could I have from these treatments?
- Will I have a scar? What will it look like?

Is there a clinical trial that might be right for me?

- What about special vitamins or diets that friends tell me about? How will I know if they are safe?
- How soon do I need to start treatment?
- What should I do to be ready for treatment?
- Is there anything I can do to help the treatment work better?
- What are the chances that the skin cancer will come back? What would we do if that happens?
- What are my chances of having skin cancer again?
- Should I take special care to avoid sun exposure? How should I do that?
- Are my family members at risk for skin cancer? What should I tell them to do?
- What's the next step?

What will happen after treatment?

- [cancer/treating/radiation-therapy.html](#)
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/basal-and-squamous-cell-skin-cancer/treating/other-than-surgery.html
 10. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/basal-and-squamous-cell-skin-cancer/treating/immunotherapy.html
 11. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/basal-and-squamous-cell-skin-cancer/treating/targeted-therapy.html
 12. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/basal-and-squamous-cell-skin-cancer/treating/systemic-chemotherapy.html
 13. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html
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