



Squamous Cell Carcinoma Fact Sheet

The most common type of non-melanoma skin cancer in Australia is the basal cell carcinoma. Squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) are also very common in Australia but potentially much more dangerous if left untreated.

SCCs arise from the outer layers of the skin. They are less common than basal cell carcinomas, but are more dangerous because they can spread to other parts of the body. They look like a red scaly sore that itches, weeps, and never seems to heal. They appear in areas most commonly exposed to the sun – the head, neck, upper back and the extremities (exposed arms and legs).

SCCs may arise from pre-existing “sun spots”. While these sun spots can be treated with liquid nitrogen cryotherapy, squamous cell carcinomas, except in very special circumstances, should not be treated with this technique as the freezing does not penetrate deeply enough to kill the tumour cells, allowing the cancer to reoccur, often much more aggressively and extensively (deeper into the skin).

As they grow, SCCs can spread to lymph nodes (under the armpits, in the groin or in the neck, for example) or via the bloodstream to other organs. This results in a dangerous situation where the cancer is much harder to treat or cure by simple removal.

For this reason SCCs must be removed when detected. This is usually done with surgery (by a GP, dermatologist or surgeon) under local anaesthetic. If the cancer is larger, it may need to be removed with specialised technique such as a skin graft placed over the wound. Radiotherapy, which uses X-rays to kill the cancer cells, is an alternative in selected patients, after assessment by a dermatologist. If the SCC is found to have spread to lymph nodes, these may also need to be removed, or treated with radiotherapy to delay further spread. If an SCC is detected early when it is small enough, it can be removed completely with regular surgical excision resulting in cure.

Preventing skin cancer

To minimise your chance of getting skin cancer:

- Avoid the sun in the middle of the day (10 am to 3 pm) as much as possible
- Stay in the shade whenever possible
- Wear protective clothing
- Apply SPF 30+, broad-spectrum sunscreen to the skin. Apply it 20 minutes or so before going outside and reapply every two hours whilst in the sun.
- Have regular skin checks by your GP or dermatologist, especially if new and persisting skin spots develop.

To visit a dermatologist, a referral is required from your doctor.