

Department of plastic surgery

# Squamous cell carcinoma

## What is squamous cell carcinoma?

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) is a type of skin cancer that affects the outer layer of the skin. It is the second most common type of skin cancer in the UK. Most people treated for SCC are completely cured with simple treatment. Usually squamous cell carcinomas are slow-growing and only spread to other parts of the body if they are left untreated for a long time. Occasionally though, they can behave more aggressively and spread at a relatively early stage.

## What causes a squamous cell carcinoma?

The usual cause is too much exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun or other sources. This can cause the cells in the outer layer of the skin to change. These changed cells can then begin to grow out of control and develop into a squamous cell carcinoma.

## Who is most likely to develop a squamous cell carcinoma?

- people who are more susceptible to sunburn
- people who have lived in countries near the equator
- outdoor workers, such as builders or farmers
- older people who have had a lifetime of frequent sun exposure
- immunosuppressed individuals (people with reduced immune systems) due to medical treatment or due to diseases which affect the immune system
- patients who have had an organ transplant and treatment required to suppress their immune system to prevent organ rejection
- people with skin conditions such as albinism and xeroderma pigmentosum.

## What does a squamous cell carcinoma look like?

SCCs often look like scaly red patches, open sores, elevated growths with a central depression, or warts. They may crust or bleed. They can become painful and disfiguring if allowed to grow.

They can appear on any part of the body, but are more common on sun exposed areas such as the head, ears, neck, and backs of hands.

## Can squamous cell carcinoma be cured?

The majority of SCCs can be cured. A small number can recur locally and/or spread (metastasise) to the lymph nodes or to other parts of the body.

## How is a squamous cell carcinoma treated?

Surgery is usually the recommended treatment. This involves removing the lesion with a margin of normal skin around it, usually using local anesthetic. The skin is then closed with some stitches or sometimes a skin graft is needed.



Radiotherapy can also be used to treat SCC. This involves shining a beam of X-rays into the skin. Usually several sessions are required.

For advanced SCC a combination of treatments may be used. If it has spread to other parts of the body, then surgery, radiotherapy and/or systemic anti-cancer treatment may be used.

## Self-examination

It is very important to examine your skin on a regular basis. You need to look out for any new lesions and lesions that are increasing in size or have a change in appearance or lesions that do not heal as expected and form a recurrent scab.

## Prevention

Protect your skin from ultraviolet radiation in strong sunlight

- Avoid exposure to the sun.
- Cover up with loose fitting but closely woven clothes.
- Wear a wide brimmed hat and protective sunglasses.
- Use high SPF sunscreen (SPF30 or more). Use a sunscreen that protects against UVB and a 4 or 5 star UVA protection rating. Apply plenty of sun cream 15 - 30 minutes before going out in the sun. Re-apply every 2 hours and straight after swimming and towel drying.
- Avoid tanning under sunlamps.

If you require any further information please contact the skin cancer clinical nurse specialists on: **0161 918 7587**.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **[the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net](mailto:the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net)**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



Contact The Christie Hotline for  
urgent support and specialist advice  
**The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658**  
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week