

Key Facts - Skin Cancer

How common is skin cancer?

Non melanoma skin cancers are the most common cancers in New Zealand. The most serious skin cancer is melanoma with over 900 men diagnosed each year.

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancers are named after the type of cell they start from. The three main types of skin cancer are basal cell cancer (most common and least serious), squamous cell cancer (less common than basal cell cancer but potentially more serious) and melanoma.

Signs of skin cancer

Some examples of skin changes are: a spot or sore that does not heal, an itchy bleeding or ulcerating spot or changes in a mole or freckle, e.g. in colour, size or shape. Check your skin regularly and if you notice anything unusual that does not go away within one month show it to your doctor.

How is skin cancer diagnosed?

- physical examination by your family doctor
- removal or biopsy of the area that has changed

Treatment

There are several ways of treating skin cancer including surgery, cryotherapy (freezing), chemotherapy or *immunotherapy creams and radiation treatment

The people most at risk of skin cancer are those with:

- a personal and/or family history of skin cancer
- a history of sunburn
- fair skin and/or having freckles or many moles

Others at risk include people who work or spend long periods of time outdoors, work indoors but get a lot of sun exposure in their leisure time or use sunbeds, sunlamps or solariums. There is a greatly increased risk of skin cancer if your immune system is lowered by drugs such as those taken after an organ transplant

Reducing your risk of skin cancer

- protect your skin from UV radiation between 11am and 4pm during the daylight saving months
- seek shade
- wear clothing that covers as much skin as possible, hats that protect the face, ears and neck and wrap around sunglasses
- use SPF 30+ water resistant sunscreen, and reapply every two hours
- cover up in winter at high altitudes or near snow or water

*treatment using substances that occur naturally in the body to destroy cancer cells.

For more detailed information please contact 0800CANCER (226 237) or visit the Cancer Society's website www.cancernz.org.nz

This key fact sheet was written in July 2008 by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. Cancer Society key fact sheets are reviewed every two years with the help of cancer experts and the public.