

ACTINIC KERATOSES

What causes actinic keratoses?

Repeated, prolonged sun exposure causes skin damage, especially in fair-skinned persons. Sun-damaged skin becomes dry and wrinkled and may form rough, scaly spots called actinic keratoses. These rough spots remain on the skin even though the crust or scale on top is picked off. Treatment of an actinic keratosis requires removal of the defective skin cells. New skin then forms from the deeper skin cells, which have escaped sun damage.

Why treat actinic keratoses?

Actinic keratoses are *not skin* cancers. Because they may sometimes turn cancerous many years later, they are called "pre-cancerous". They should be treated for this reason.

Treatment

Actinic keratoses can be removed surgically with a scraping instrument called a curette. Another way of destroying actinic keratoses is to freeze them with liquid nitrogen. Freezing causes scabbing and shedding of the sun-damaged skin. Sometimes I am not sure whether the growth is harmless. When this occurs, I prefer to remove the growth and send it for microscopic analysis (biopsy). Healing after removal usually takes two weeks, depending on the size and location of the keratosis. Hands and legs heal more slowly than the face. The skin's final appearance is usually excellent.

Another way to treat actinic keratoses is with various topical agents. These are applied directly to the skin. Sometimes the medications are applied to individual keratoses; sometimes the medication is applied to the whole area to treat any keratosis that may be present. There are various topical agents which are available. If this would be an option in your case, I will provide a separate sheet which discusses this treatment.

Prevention

Sun damage is permanent. Once sun damage has progressed to the point where actinic keratoses develop, new keratoses may appear even without further skin exposure. You should avoid excessive sun exposure. Do not go overboard and deprive yourself of the pleasure of being outdoors. Reasonable sun protection should be your aim such as the use of proper clothing and sunscreens.