

DERMATOLOGY

Winning the battle against skin tumours

With so many types of skin tumours, understanding the difference between benign and malignant ones can help resolve issues at an early stage.



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There are many types of skin tumours or skin growths. Some of them are harmless and do not require treatment. These are called benign tumours. On the other hand, there are cancerous skin growths – also known as malignant tumours – and these must be removed early.

Benign Skin Tumours

These are caused by the proliferation of benign cells in the skin, and common forms include moles, seborrhoeic keratosis, skin tags, syringoma and sebaceous hyperplasia.

Moles, or melanocytic naevi, are caused by abnormal collection of pigment producing cells in the skin. Most are dark and pigmented but some moles may be lightly pigmented or even flesh-coloured. Moles initially appear flat but may become raised and dome-shaped later in life.

Seborrhoeic keratosis are superficial skin growths commonly located on the face, though they can occur on the body and groin. They initially appear brown and slightly raised, but may enlarge and become darker and more numerous with age.

Skin tags are skin-coloured growths which commonly occur on the neck, underarms, groin and eyelids. Multiple skin tags may appear around the same area.

Syringomas are small flesh-coloured lumps that usually occur just below or around the eyes. They form when there is an overgrowth of sweat ducts in the skin.

Sebaceous hyperplasias are small yellowish lumps often seen on the cheeks. They occur



when there is an overgrowth of oil glands just beneath the skin surface.

All of these conditions can be treated by a dermatologist and are usually removed for cosmetic reasons. Moles may be excised or removed with laser, while the rest can be treated with either electrosurgery or laser.

Skin Cancers

These are malignant growths and there are three main types – basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and malignant melanoma.

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer. Slow-growing and painless, it may look like an ulcer and commonly appears on the face. If untreated, the cancer can destroy the surrounding skin and underlying muscle and bone.

Squamous cell carcinoma presents as a fleshy lump – usually on sun exposed skin – which can increase in size and form an ulcer. It usually occurs in elderly patients.

Malignant melanoma often presents as a dark brown/black skin growth or ulcer. People born with large moles (known as giant congenital nevi) or have family histories of melanoma are at increased risk. Seek a dermatologist's advice if a mole grows rapidly in size, has varying shades of colour and/or a thick and irregular surface, starts bleeding or shows other changes over time.

Early detection and treatment is crucial as skin cancers can spread to other parts of the body. Any skin growth that is visibly enlarging or changing its appearance should be assessed and examined by a dermatologist.

As chronic sun exposure is an important risk factor for most skin cancers, it is also imperative to practise proper sun protection and avoid long hours of sun exposure. ☀