

Nonmelanoma Skin Cancer: Risk Factors



It isn't always clear why a person gets cancer. But experts know that certain risk factors can raise your odds. Learning about your own risk factors for skin cancer can help you protect your future health. Here's what you should know.

What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is anything that increases the chance of developing a disease. But having a risk factor doesn't mean you will definitely get the disease.

General risk factors for cancer might include things like smoking, diet, or family history. Risk factors don't cause cancer. But they can make it more likely for a person to get cancer.

Here are a few important things to remember:

- Some people with 1 or more risk factors never get cancer. Other people can get cancer and have no risk factors.
- Many risk factors are out of our control, such as age and family history. But several lifestyle risk factors are things we can change, such as smoking, sun exposure, or diet.
- Risk factor research is ongoing. There's still a lot to learn about what puts us at risk for cancer.

If you know you have a lifestyle risk factor, think of it as an opportunity for improvement. You get to make changes now that can help protect your future health. For instance, sun exposure is a risk factor for many types of skin cancer. But there are ways to protect yourself from the sun.

What can put you at risk for nonmelanoma skin cancer?

Common risk factors we can control include:

- **Sun exposure.** The sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can damage the cells in your skin, which might lead to skin cancer. This risk is even greater for those who live closer to the equator or at higher altitudes, where the sun's rays are stronger. Choosing to limit time spent in the sun and protect your skin can help lower your chances for skin cancer.
- **Tanning booths or beds and sunlamps.** These artificial sources of UV rays can raise your risk, especially if you used them before the age of 30. If you fall into this category, that's OK. You can keep your risk as low as possible going forward.
- **Smoking.** People who smoke are more likely to get squamous cell skin cancer, especially on the lips. Quitting is not easy though. Ask your healthcare provider to help you get started.

These are risk factors we can't control, but still need to be aware of:

- **Certain skin, hair, and eye colors.** People with naturally light-colored, pale or freckled skin; red or blond hair; and green, blue, or gray eyes have a higher risk. But even people with darker skin can get skin cancer. Remember that these factors do not mean you will get skin cancer. People with albinism (inherited lack of skin pigment) are at greater risk.
- **Personal history of skin cancer or precancer.** If you've had skin cancer before, it means you have a greater risk of getting it again in the future. The same is true if you had skin precancer, such as actinic keratosis.
- **Older age.** While skin cancer can happen at any age, the risk rises as people get older.
- **Being male.** Men are more likely to get nonmelanoma skin cancers than women.

- **Weakened immune system.** Some people have a weakened immune system from medical treatment or a disease, their immune system isn't operating at full capacity. This raises the risk for skin cancer and a more serious case.
- **Exposure to arsenic or aromatic hydrocarbons.** Being around large amounts of these chemicals increases your risk for skin cancer.
- **Past radiation treatment.** If you had radiation therapy for another condition, the area that was treated has a higher risk of skin cancer.
- **Scars, burns, or inflamed skin.** Skin cancers are more likely to show up on damaged skin.
- **Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection.** Certain types of HPV can infect the skin in the genital area and increase your risk for skin cancer there.
- **Certain rare inherited conditions.** People with basal cell nevus syndrome (Gorlin syndrome) or xeroderma pigmentosum (XP) have a much higher risk of skin cancer, starting at an early age.
- **Certain medicines.** Some medicines can weaken your immune system or make your skin more likely to sunburn, increasing the risk for skin cancers. Examples include vandetanib, vemurafenib, and voriconazole. A type of medicine to treat melanoma, called BRAF inhibitors, can also increase the risk of getting new nonmelanoma skin cancers. Always ask your healthcare provider about the benefits and risks of a medicine before you take it.

What are your risk factors?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your personal risk factors for nonmelanoma skin cancer. They can help offer ideas to reduce your risk as much as possible. They may advise having skin exams or doing monthly skin exams for yourself at home.

But you don't have to wait for your next appointment to start making changes. Things like wearing sunscreen and staying away from tanning beds are easy to do now.

Protect your skin now so you have a better chance of preventing future skin problems.

© 2000-2027 The StayWell Company, LLC. All rights reserved. This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your healthcare professional's instructions
This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your Healthcare professional's instructions. Copyright Krames LLC.