**Squamous Cell Carcinoma**

**What is a squamous cell carcinoma?**

There are two main categories of skin cancer: melanomas and non-melanoma skin cancers. Squamous cell carcinoma is one of the non-melanoma skin cancers. It is the second most common type of skin cancer in the UK.

**What causes a squamous cell carcinoma?**

The most common cause is too much exposure to ultra-violet light from the sun or from sun beds. This causes certain cells (keratinocytes) in one of the layers of the skin (the epidermis) to grow out of control into a tumour.

Squamous cell carcinomas can occur on any part of your body, but are most common on areas that are exposed to the sun, such as your head and neck (including the lips and ears) and the backs of your hands. Squamous cell carcinomas can also crop up where the skin has been damaged by X-rays, and also on old scars, ulcers, burns and persistent chronic wounds. Squamous cell carcinomas are not contagious.

**Who is most likely to have a squamous cell carcinoma?**

Squamous cell carcinomas mainly affect the following groups:

Older people – even those who tend to avoid the sun - but younger ones who are out in the sun a lot are at risk too.   
Builders, farmers, surfers, sailors and people who often use sun-beds can develop squamous cell carcinomas when they are quite young.   
Those with a fair skin are more likely to get them than people with a dark skin.   
Anyone who has had a lot of ultraviolet light treatment for skin conditions such as psoriasis will also be at increased risk of getting a squamous cell carcinomas.   
Those whose immune system has been suppressed by medication taken after an organ transplant, or by treatment for leukaemia or a lymphoma.   
  
  
**Are squamous cell carcinomas hereditary?**

No, they are not; but some of the things that increase the risk of getting one, such as fair skin, a tendency to burn rather than tan, and freckling, do run in families.

**What does a squamous cell carcinoma look like?**

A squamous cell carcinoma usually appears as a scaly or crusty area of skin, with a red, inflamed base. Most small squamous cell carcinomas are not painful.

**How will my squamous cell carcinoma be diagnosed?**

If your doctor thinks that the mark on your skin needs further investigation, you will be referred to a skin specialist who will decide whether or not it really is a squamous cell carcinoma. To confirm the diagnosis, a small piece of the abnormal skin (a biopsy), or the whole area (an excision biopsy), will be cut out and examined under the microscope. You will be given a local anaesthetic beforehand to numb the skin.

**Can a squamous cell carcinoma be cured?**

Yes, squamous cell carcinomas can be cured if they are detected early. But if they are left untreated for too long, a few may spread to other parts of the body, and this can be serious and painful.

