

Actinic Keratosis

What causes Actinic Keratoses?

Actinic Keratoses (AK's) are skin lesions caused by long-term exposure to the sun and are considered to be precancerous. They are scaly, rough to the touch, irregularly shaped, and skin-colored, reddish brown, or yellowish in color. These spots remain on the skin or quickly return even if the surface crust or scale is picked off.

Why treat Actinic Keratoses?

Actinic keratoses are removed to prevent their progression into skin cancers. Recent studies suggest that some AK lesions actually may be a very early form of a type of skin cancer, Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC) that has not spread beyond a small, confined area. It is not yet possible to tell which AK lesions will go on to become skin cancer.

Experts from the American Cancer Society, the Skin Cancer Foundation, and the American Academy of Dermatology have recommended that all patients with AK lesions be evaluated and undergo some form of treatment.

Treatment:

Actinic Keratoses may be removed by freezing them with liquid nitrogen (cryotherapy). Freezing causes the precancerous tissue to blister and be shed from the skin after 5-10 days. Cryotherapy is the most common treatment when a patient has a few, small AK lesions. When there are many Actinic Keratoses, a useful treatment is the application of a medicated cream. This medication is usually applied to the keratoses for 2 to 4 weeks; these medications are not to be used in the sun. This treatment will cause all of the pre-cancerous spots to be red and inflamed until they resolve. A cortisone cream may be prescribed later to decrease the redness/irritation. The exact length of treatment varies depending on the location and number of keratoses, but the applications are continued until it is determined by examination that the desired result has been obtained.

Lesions also may be surgically removed during a visit to your dermatologist. Surgical removal is usually used for large lesions or if an AK of any size looks suspicious and must be sent to a laboratory for further examination.

Prevention of Actinic Keratoses:

Sun damage is permanent and cumulative. Once sun damage has progressed to the point where Actinic Keratoses have developed, new keratoses may appear even without further sun exposure. It is important to avoid excessive sun exposure. Try to avoid mid-day sun exposure (between 10 am and 3 pm). Protective hats and clothing as well as sunscreens are very effective in preventing sun damage. The most effective sunscreens are those that block UVA and UVB and have an SPF of 30 or greater. These protective measures have now been shown to actually reduce the number of Actinic Keratoses' present on the skin. Regular skin examinations will help catch further lesions that need to be treated.