

Basal Cell Cancer: Addressing the Most Common Skin Cancer

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Commentary

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DESCRIPTION

Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC), the most prevalent form of skin cancer, arises from the basal cells-small, round cells found in the lower part of the epidermis. Despite its common occurrence, BCC is often overshadowed in public discourse by more aggressive skin cancers like melanoma. Yet, the rising incidence of BCC, coupled with its potential for significant morbidity if untreated, underscores the need for increased awareness and understanding. This commentary explores the etiology, clinical presentation, treatment options, and prevention strategies for BCC.

Understanding basal cell carcinoma

Basal cell carcinoma originates in the basal cells of the skin, which are responsible for producing new skin cells as old ones die off. This cancer typically develops on areas of the skin that are frequently exposed to sunlight, such as the head, neck, and arms. Chronic exposure to Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or tanning beds is the primary risk factor for BCC. Other risk factors include fair skin, a history of sunburns, a weakened immune system, and exposure to radiation or certain chemicals.

BCC is generally slow-growing and rarely metastasizes to other parts of the body. However, it can cause significant local tissue damage if not treated promptly, sometimes leading to disfigurement, particularly when located on the face.

Clinical presentation and diagnosis

Basal cell carcinoma often manifests as a persistent, non-healing sore or a growth that might bleed, ooze, or crust. It can present in various forms.

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Nodular BCC: Appears as a pearly or translucent bump, often with visible blood vessels. It is the most common type and typically occurs on the face.

Superficial BCC: Presents as a red, scaly patch that might be mistaken for eczema or psoriasis. It commonly appears on the trunk.

Morpheaform (sclerosing) BCC: Characterized by a waxy, scar-like lesion. It tends to be more aggressive and can grow more deeply into surrounding tissues. Early detection is key to successful treatment. Diagnosis usually involves a skin biopsy, where a sample of the suspicious lesion is examined under a microscope to confirm the presence of cancerous cells.

Treatment options

The treatment of basal cell carcinoma aims to remove or destroy the cancerous cells while preserving as much healthy tissue as possible. Several treatment options are available, depending on the size, depth, and location of the tumor, as well as the patient's overall health and preferences.

Surgical treatments

Excisional surgery: The most common treatment, where the tumor and a margin of surrounding healthy tissue are surgically removed. It is effective for most BCCs and allows for histological examination to ensure clear margins.

Mohs micrographic surgery: This technique involves the step-by-step removal of the cancerous tissue, with each layer examined under a microscope until no cancer cells remain. It is particularly useful for BCCs in critical areas like the face, where preserving healthy tissue is essential, and for recurrent or large tumors.

Curettage and electrodesiccation: This procedure involves scraping off the tumor with a curette followed by cauterizing the area with an electric needle. It is generally used for smaller, less aggressive BCCs.

Non-surgical treatments

Radiation therapy: Used primarily for patients who cannot undergo surgery or for tumors located in areas where surgery would be difficult. It involves targeting the tumor with high-energy radiation to destroy cancer cells.

Topical treatments: For superficial BCCs, topical creams containing imiquimod or 5-fluorouracil can be applied to stimulate the immune response or directly kill cancer cells.

Photodynamic therapy: This involves applying a photosensitizing agent to the skin, which is then activated by light to destroy cancer cells. It is effective for superficial BCCs and offers good cosmetic outcomes.

Emerging therapies

Targeted therapies, such as hedgehog pathway inhibitors, are used for advanced or metastatic BCCs. These drugs block molecular pathways that drive the growth of cancer cells and offer hope for patients with tumors that are not amenable to traditional treatments.

Prevention and awareness

Preventing basal cell carcinoma primarily involves minimizing UV exposure. Strategies include using broad-spectrum sunscreen with a high Sun Protection Factor (SPF), wearing protective clothing and hats, seeking shade,

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and avoiding tanning beds. Regular skin checks, both self-examinations and professional screenings, are essential for early detection and treatment.

Public awareness campaigns are essential to educate individuals about the risks of UV exposure and the importance of skin protection. Encouraging people to adopt sun-safe behaviors can significantly reduce the incidence of BCC and other skin cancers.

Basal cell carcinoma, while rarely life-threatening, can cause substantial morbidity and impact quality of life. Its increasing prevalence highlights the need for greater public awareness and proactive measures to prevent UV damage. Advances in treatment offer multiple effective options tailored to individual cases, ensuring that most patients can achieve excellent outcomes. As we continue to improve our understanding of BCC, a comprehensive approach involving prevention, early detection, and personalized treatment will be key to managing this common skin cancer effectively.