

Skin Cancer: Merkel Cell Carcinoma

Skin cancer is a threat to every person on earth, regardless of age, race, or location. There are actually several variations of skin cancer, including Merkel cell carcinoma, the uncommon form of the disease.

Merkel cell carcinoma occurs just below the skin, usually in the hair follicles. This form of skin cancer is most common among people over sixty, and those who have had organ transplants. It's believed that the drugs prescribed to suppress the immune system and prevent rejection of the transplanted organ allow the cancer to get a foothold. Early detection is required for a positive outcome, as this is a fast spreading cancer and must be diagnosed early.

The physical appearance of Merkel cell carcinoma is somewhat different than the other skin cancers. This type of cancer appears as shiny or dense nodules or tumors. The nodules can be anywhere from a half inch to two inches in size, and appear bluish, pink or red. Like many of the other skin cancers, Merkel cell carcinoma is likely to appear on the head or neck. Half of all diagnoses are found on the neck or head, with a third of the remaining cases found on the legs and arms.

If you suspect that you may have Merkel cell carcinoma, your health care provider will do a physical. He or she will want to do a complete family history, and will require all of your personal medical history as well. Allergies to medications and treatment preferences will all be discussed.

Merkel cell carcinoma can resemble other cancers, making it a tricky condition to treat. A biopsy must be done to make a positive diagnosis. As your physician examines you, he or she will check your lymph nodes for swelling, and will run blood tests to check your blood cell counts. Your doctor will also conduct a liver function test and may suggest that you undergo a CT scan. With all of this information at hand, your doctor will be able to make a proper diagnosis.

Pending a positive diagnosis of Merkel cell carcinoma, the first step in treatment is surgery. Your surgeon will remove the cancerous tumor and some of the healthy tissue surrounding it. If, for any reason, the tumor cannot be removed, then alternate treatments including chemotherapy or radiation therapy may be used in an attempt to shrink the tumor. Surgical tests will also be done to investigate the nearby lymph nodes. If there is any indication that the cancer had spread to the lymph nodes, they will be removed as a preventative measure.

If radiation treatment is chosen as the treatment plan, your therapist will use x-rays at a higher than normal energy to shrink and hopefully kill the cancerous tumors. There are two possible methods for using this therapy. A machine may be used to deliver the radiation therapy, or radioisotopes are inserted into the body to fight the cancer. This latter method is called internal radiation therapy.

Chemotherapy is a therapy using strong drugs. The doctor prescribes these drugs to poison and kill the cancer, taking care not to prescribe too much and kill the host as well. Chemotherapy may be taken intravenously or in pill form.

Merkel cell carcinoma is a treatable condition, but only if it's detected early. The most important thing to remember is that if you notice a nodule on your body, or an area that just doesn't look right, see your physician immediately. Early detection can save your life.