

Department of Dermatology

Solar keratoses

Information for patients



You have been given a diagnosis of solar keratoses. This leaflet has been written to give you further information about your diagnosis and treatment options.

What are solar keratoses?

Solar keratoses, otherwise known as actinic keratoses, are a common feature of sun-damaged skin. They can develop in exposed areas such as the face, backs of the hands and arms, and, in women, on the lower legs.

They occur most commonly in fair-skinned people with blue eyes, red hair, freckles and a tendency to burn in the sun. People who have lived or worked abroad in a sunny place or who have worked outdoors or enjoy outdoor hobbies are most at risk. It may take many years before they start, and they don't usually appear before the age of 40.

Solar keratoses appear as small red patches, ranging from ½cm to 3cm wide, with a rough surface. Sometimes the skin can become very thick over these patches, and occasionally they can have the appearance of horns or spikes.

The surrounding skin often looks sun-damaged, blotchy, freckled and wrinkled. In addition, on very sun-damaged areas, the solar keratoses can merge together to form large scaly red patches – this is sometimes referred to as 'field change'. Very rarely they can develop into a skin cancer that will need to be removed under local anaesthetic (when the skin is made numb). Signs of this are the patch beginning to grow into a lump quickly, bleeding and/or forming an ulcer.

How are they diagnosed?

Solar keratoses may be diagnosed by their appearance to the naked eye. The diagnosis may be confirmed by taking a sample of skin (also known as a biopsy) and examining it under a microscope.

Treatment options

Solar keratoses can be cured with a variety of treatments, including freezing, scraping, surgical removal or special cream. However, other new areas may develop in the future, from the surrounding sun-damaged skin. If the patch is not troublesome, your doctor may simply recommend that it is kept under observation.

Self-help

It is important to protect your skin from the sun once you have solar keratoses. You should wear a high SPF sunscreen or a hat each day during the summer months (even on dull days, as the sun's rays still get through the clouds). Your doctor, nurse or GP can advise you further about sun safety.

Make sure you check for any changes in the appearance of your patches and report any lumpy growth, bleeding or ulceration immediately to your GP.

Further information

British Association of Dermatologists

Tel: 0207 383 0266

Email: admin@bad.org.uk

Website: www.bad.org.uk

Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK offers information about sun awareness and checking your moles.

Tel: 0808 800 4040

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Who to contact

If you have any questions about your diagnosis or management of your solar keratoses, please speak to your GP.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

Author: Dr Rubeta Matin
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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information

