

Department of Dermatology

# Bowen's disease

Information for patients



You have been given a diagnosis of Bowen's disease. This leaflet has been written to give you further information about your diagnosis and treatment options.

## What is Bowen's disease?

Bowen's disease is a common skin condition, usually beginning in later life. It is also known as squamous cell carcinoma in situ. This is a growth of cells which just affects the outer layer of skin.

It appears as a red scaly patch, 1cm to 3cm in diameter, on an exposed site, most commonly the lower legs. Sometimes there may be more than one patch.

## How is it caused?

Bowen's disease is thought to develop as a result of long-term sun exposure and it is more likely to arise in people who are immunosuppressed (have a lowered immune system). Occasionally it may occur after radiotherapy or can develop many years after exposure to arsenic or engineering oils. You cannot pass it on to others.

The patches grow very slowly and can last for many years. You may not like the way they look and they may occasionally be itchy or sore, but they generally do not cause any serious harm. Occasionally they can develop into a skin cancer (in less than 10% of people), which would need to be removed under local anaesthetic (to make the skin numb). Signs of this are if the patch begins to grow into a lump quickly, bleed or form an ulcer.

## How is Bowen's disease diagnosed?

Bowen's disease is often diagnosed by its appearance to the naked eye. The diagnosis may also be confirmed by taking a sample of skin (also known as a biopsy) and examining it under a microscope.

## Treatment options

Bowen's disease can be cured with a variety of treatments, including freezing, scraping, surgical removal or a special cream. However, if the patch is not troublesome, your doctor may simply suggest that it is kept under observation.

## Self-help

It is worthwhile protecting your skin from the sun once you have Bowen's disease. You should wear a sunscreen or a hat each day during the summer months (even on dull days, as the sun's rays still get through the clouds). Thick tights, trousers and long skirts are also helpful to protect the legs.

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

## Further information

### **British Association of Dermatologists**

Tel: 0207 383 0266

Website: [www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)

Email: [admin@bad.org.uk](mailto:admin@bad.org.uk)

### **Cancer Research UK**

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

Tel: 0808 800 4040

Email: [www.cancerresearch.org](http://www.cancerresearch.org)

## How to contact us

If you have any questions or would like further advice about skin cancer, please speak with our Macmillan Clinical Nurse Specialist:

Tel: 01856 228 233

(Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 4.00pm)

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](mailto:PALS@ouh.nhs.uk)**

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