

Seborrheic Keratosis



What is a seborrheic keratosis?

Seborrheic keratoses are a common type of skin growth, especially in people over 40 years old. They are completely harmless, but need to be checked by a dermatologist so they can be distinguished from skin cancer, especially melanoma.

A seborrheic keratosis arises first in adult life, because of excessive growth of the top layer of skin cells. It is typically pigmented, appearing as a brown, black, or pale tan growth, and is often found on the face, shoulders, chest, or back. While it can occur as a single growth, multiple growths (seborrheic keratoses) are usually present at any one time. They are superficial growths and are loosely attached to the skin, so they can sometimes fall off.

Who gets seborrheic keratoses?

Seborrheic keratoses can occur in anyone, but they are the most common type of skin growth in “older” people, usually over the age of 40 years. Although their cause is unknown, they can run in families, but they are not contagious and cannot be transmitted from one person to the next. Some experts believe sunlight may play a role in their development, but this notion is still controversial because they can occur on both covered and uncovered areas of the body. Sometimes seborrheic keratoses may develop after sunburn or other irritating skin conditions such as dermatitis. They arise equally in men and women, and some people develop more and more as they get older.

How are seborrheic keratoses diagnosed?

Their appearance is very typical, and this can help the healthcare professional make a diagnosis. When they first develop, they look like flat bumps on the skin surface and may be pale tan in color. They have a very

characteristic waxy, “stuck-on” appearance clinically, which means they appear very superficially on the skin, almost as if they were stuck on or glued to the patient’s skin. Eventually they often thicken and become rough, with a wart-like appearance, although some do remain smooth. They also gradually darken, and may even turn black, but the color changes are harmless. However,

although they are not cancerous, it is important to get a diagnosis from a healthcare professional because they can look like some forms of skin cancer, especially when they turn black. The healthcare professional also may perform a biopsy if any of the growths appear unusual in any other way.



Seborrheic keratoses are harmless and tend to be painless, so they usually do not need to be treated.

Treatment and care

Seborrheic keratoses are harmless and tend to be painless, so they usually do not need to be treated. They do not go away, however, and

some people prefer to have them removed for cosmetic reasons, or if they become itchy, or irritated by shaving, clothing, or jewelry. They are most commonly removed by relatively simple procedures such as:

■ Shave biopsy/shave removal and excision:

This is the preferred method of biopsying these lesions, particularly if a cutaneous malignancy, especially melanoma, is suspected. The healthcare professional may perform a shave biopsy of the lesion, or perform a deep or “scoop” shave in an effort to remove the lesion entirely. The healthcare professional may also curette the remainder of the lesion to ensure removal of any remaining lesion. Primary excision can also be used to ensure complete removal when the healthcare professional is especially worried about a melanoma clinically. Often even if a shave biopsy does not remove the entire lesion, your body may remove the remainder as it heals after the biopsy procedure.

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- **Cryotherapy:** This involves freezing the growth with liquid nitrogen, and it falls off a few days later.
- **Laser surgery:** This laser treatment is used to vaporize the growth. This procedure is especially used for small growths.
- **Electrocautery:** The healthcare professional uses an electric current to burn the growth off.
- **Curettage:** This involves scraping the growth off the skin's surface, and may be combined with electrocautery.

Local anesthetics can be used to numb the area of skin to make the treatment more comfortable. Because they are only on the skin's surface, their removal shouldn't lead to much scarring. Healing can be a little slower after curettage, however, and scarring may be more common.

How do you know if treatment is working?

If treatment has worked, the growth will not return. After the growth is removed, the skin in that region may become lighter, slightly darker, or may develop a scar. However, these often tend to fade over time.

What is the outlook for patients with seborrheic keratoses?

Unfortunately, you cannot prevent new growths developing, either in the same location or more typically in new regions of the body. So even if one is successfully removed, it may return. Older patients may develop larger numbers of them. However, the outlook is still very good, because these growths are completely harmless and do not spread anywhere else in the body.

Learn more!

Learn more about seborrheic keratoses through these trusted resources:

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000884.htm

www.aad.org/dermatology-a-to-z/diseases-and-treatments/q---t/seborrheic-keratoses/signs-symptoms

emedicine.medscape.com/article/1059477-overview

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