

Meet Your Care Team: Who Does What?

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If you have been diagnosed with skin cancer, you may be referred to several physicians who will establish a care plan for your skin cancer.

Dermatologist: A dermatologist is a physician specializing in the skin. A dermatologist likely identified your skin cancer and took a biopsy (small tissue sample) to confirm the skin cancer. Dermatologists can perform excision, where they take a wide margin (3-5 mm) around the skin cancer to fully remove it.^{1,2}

NP/PA in Dermatology: There are also nurse practitioners (NPs) or physician assistants (PAs) who specialize in dermatology and work with dermatologists. They may complete skin exams, take biopsies, and practice minor procedures.³

Mohs Surgeon: A Mohs surgeon is a dermatologist with advanced training in Mohs Micrographic Surgery (MMS). MMS is a specialized approach in which the Mohs surgeon removes a small margin (1-2 mm) around the skin cancer and examines the edges under a microscope - while the patient is in the waiting room - to determine that the cancer is completely gone.² If it is not, they remove a bit more and repeat the process until no cancer remains. When skin cancer is in a cosmetically sensitive area (hands, feet, scalp, etc), or if it has aggressive characteristics, such as being very large or very deep, MMS may be used.^{1,2}

Oncologist: An oncologist is a medical doctor specializing in systemic cancer treatments. If your skin cancer is very large or has spread to lymph nodes or other parts of the body, they may recommend infusions or other medications to control the cancer.⁵

Radiation Oncologist: A radiation oncologist is a physician who administers radiation to kill cancer cells. For rare high-risk tumors, radiation oncologists will perform adjuvant (after-surgery) radiation to reduce the risk of the cancer returning. Or, in very elderly individuals or people who are too sick to receive surgery, they may use radiation for the main treatment of the skin cancer.⁴

Head and Neck Surgeon: A head and neck surgeon, also known as an 'Ear, Nose and Throat' doctor (ENT), has completed specialized surgical training in the head and neck. If your skin cancer is very deep in the head and neck, a head and neck surgeon may be part of your care team to perform deeper surgery.⁵

Plastic Surgeon or Oculoplastic Surgeon: Plastic surgeons have special training in complex surgeries. If your skin cancer is in a delicate area, such as involving the eyes, or is

very large and requires advanced reconstruction to make the area as normal as possible after skin cancer removal, a plastic surgeon or oculoplastic surgeon may be involved in your surgery.⁶

Surgical Oncologist: A surgical oncologist is a surgeon who specializes in cancer surgeries. This type of doctor may be necessary to remove lymph nodes if the cancer has spread to lymph nodes, or perform deeper surgery.⁶

Summary

Most skin cancers are low risk and will be handled by dermatology surgery or Mohs surgery alone. More advanced cases may require additional specialists.

References

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