

Metastasis in Non-Melanoma Skin Cancers: For Patients and Caregivers

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Introduction

Metastasis is when cancer spreads from where it started to other parts of the body. This happens when cancer cells move into nearby tissues and then into the bloodstream or lymph system to form new tumors elsewhere. When cancer has spread in this way, it's often called Stage IV cancer. The risk of metastasis can depend on factors like the type, location, and size of the original tumor. Non-melanoma skin cancers (NMSCs) can spread to different areas in the body.

Levels of Metastasis

Cancer can spread at different levels:

- **Lymph Node Metastasis:** This is when cancer spreads to nearby lymph nodes. This is often the first sign that cancer is spreading and helps doctors understand how serious it is.
- **Visceral Metastasis:** This means cancer has spread to internal organs like the lungs, liver, or brain. This is a sign of advanced cancer and usually means a poorer outcome.
- **Skin Metastasis:** Sometimes cancer spreads to nearby skin or tissue, including with skin cancers. This usually happens later in the disease.
- **Perineural Metastasis:** This type involves cancer spreading to nerves around the tumor, which can cause pain, numbness, or weakness and is often very serious.

Common Metastatic Sites for NMSCs

Different types of non-melanoma skin cancers can spread to various parts of the body:

- **Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC):** While rare, SCC can spread more often than other skin cancers. It usually spreads to the parotid or cervical lymph nodes and can also affect axillary and groin nodes.
- **Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC):** BCC rarely spreads, but when it does, it usually affects lymph nodes, bones, lungs, and skin.
- **Sebaceous Carcinoma:** This cancer can spread more easily, often to lymph nodes and sometimes to organs like the lungs, brain, or liver.
- **Merkel Cell Carcinoma:** This aggressive cancer often spreads to lymph nodes and can also affect the abdomen and other distant lymph nodes.
- **Adnexal Carcinoma:** This type rarely spreads but can sometimes affect regional lymph nodes.
- **Extramammary Paget's Disease:** This rare cancer usually has a low risk of spreading, but it can affect lymph nodes and the central nervous system.
- **Dermatofibrosarcoma Protuberans:** This cancer most often spreads to the lungs but can also affect lymph nodes.

- **Atypical Fibroxanthoma:** This cancer generally doesn't spread, but in aggressive cases, it can affect the parotid gland, lymph nodes, and nearby tissues.

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