

SKIN CANCER CHAMPIONS COMMUNITY

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Understanding Atypical Fibroxanthoma: A Guide for Patients

Written by Zaim Haq

What is Atypical Fibroxanthoma?

Atypical fibroxanthoma (AFX) is a very rare form of skin cancer of the spindle cells that often gets mistaken for squamous cell carcinoma or other forms of skin cancer. AFX occurs within the top layers of your skin but can involve deeper structures. This condition usually appears on parts of the body that get a lot of sun, like the head and neck. In fact, about 85% of AFX cases are found in this area¹!

Why Do People Get AFX?

The sun is the main reason behind why most people get AFX, just like with some other skin cancers. When your skin gets too much sunlight, it can damage the cells. Older males are the ones who most commonly get AFX, due to this prolonged sun exposure. Here are a few reasons why someone might get AFX²:

- Spending a lot of time in the sun without protection (like sunscreen or hats).
- Being older, which means your skin has been exposed to the sun for more years.
- Increased x-ray radiation exposure.
- Having a history of other skin conditions (xeroderma pigmentosum) or treatments that might make your skin more vulnerable to AFX as well.

AFX can also happen in areas of the skin not exposed to the sun or in younger patients, but this is even less common.

How Do You Know If You Have AFX?

AFX can look like a lump on your skin that might be pink or red. It's usually found on areas that get a lot of sun like the head or neck. When AFX affects bigger nerves, a person might feel burning, numbness, or even have trouble moving or feel weak in certain areas. AFX is usually slow growing, but it can grow quickly and damage the tissue surrounding it. If your doctor sees something on your skin that looks like AFX, they'll take a tiny piece of it (this is called a biopsy) to check it out under a microscope and make sure what it is³.

What Happens If You Have AFX?

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If a dermatologist believes you have AFX, they will first examine the spot and perform a biopsy to confirm the diagnosis. Should they worry the AFX might be more dangerous, they'll conduct more specific tests to find out whether it has moved to other parts of the body³.

Treating AFX

The main way to treat AFX is by removing it with surgery either through wide local excision or Mohs surgery. Doctors will carefully take out the AFX lump to make sure it's all gone.

Wide local excision involves cutting out the AFX lesion along with some of the healthy skin around it, called the margin, to ensure all abnormal cells are removed. The size of the margin may vary depending on the doctor's assessment of the lesion. Mohs surgery, on the other hand, involves removing the cancer layer by layer. Each layer is examined under a microscope for cancer cells at the time of the surgery. The process continues until a layer shows no signs of cancer, ensuring the complete removal of cancerous cells while preserving as much healthy tissue as possible².

Looking After Your Skin

Once you've had AFX, or even if you haven't, taking care of your skin is important. This means wearing sunscreen whenever you're out in the sun, wearing hats and long sleeves to protect your skin, and making sure you don't get too much sun. Checking your skin and going to the doctor for annual skin check-ups is a good idea too. This way, you can catch any abnormal lumps or spots early on^{2, 5}.

Protecting your skin from the sun is the best way to prevent AFX and other skin problems. Remember, taking care of your skin now can help keep it healthy and strong for years to come!

Citations

1. McClure E, Carr MJ, Patel A, et al. Atypical Fibroxanthoma: Outcomes from a Large Single Institution Series. *Cancer Control*. 2023;30:10732748231155699. doi:10.1177/10732748231155699
2. Iorizzo LJ 3rd, Brown MD. Atypical fibroxanthoma: a review of the literature. *Dermatol Surg*. 2011;37(2):146-157. doi:10.1111/j.1524-4725.2010.01843.x

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3. Rosenfeld D, Alam M, Van Tine B, Council ML. Atypical fibroxanthoma: A malignant tumor of the skin and soft tissue. *J Am Acad Dermatol*. 2020;83(6):e429-e430. doi:10.1016/j.jaad.2020.07.022
4. "What is atypical fibroxanthoma?". (n.d.). <https://dermnetnz.org/topics/atypical-fibroxanthoma>

Understanding Atypical Fibroxanthoma: A Guide for Caregivers

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Why Do People Get AFX?

The sun is the main reason behind why most people get AFX, just like with some other skin cancers. When your loved one's skin gets too much sunlight, it can damage the cells. Older males are the ones who most commonly get AFX, due to this prolonged sun exposure. Here are a few reasons why someone might get AFX²:

- Spending a lot of time in the sun without protection (like sunscreen or hats).
- Being older, which means the skin has been exposed to the sun for more years.
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AFX can also happen in areas of the skin not exposed to the sun or in younger patients, but this is even less common.

How Do You Know If Your Loved One Has AFX?

AFX can look like a lump on your loved one's skin that might be pink or red. It's usually found on areas that get a lot of sun like the head or neck. When AFX affects bigger nerves, a person might feel burning, numbness, or even have trouble moving or feel weak in certain areas. AFX is usually slow growing, but it can grow quickly and damage the tissue surrounding it. If your loved one's doctor sees something on the skin that looks like AFX, they'll take a tiny piece of it (this is called a biopsy) to check it out under a microscope and make sure what it is³.

What Happens If Your Loved One Has AFX?

If a dermatologist believes your loved one has AFX, they will first examine the spot and perform a biopsy to confirm the diagnosis. Should they worry the AFX might be more dangerous, they'll conduct more specific tests to find out whether it has moved to other parts of the body³.

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Looking After Your Loved One's Skin

Once your loved one has had AFX, or even if they haven't, taking care of the skin is important. This means wearing sunscreen whenever your loved one is out in the sun, wearing hats and long sleeves to protect the skin, and making sure they don't get too much sun. Checking their skin and going to the doctor for annual skin check-ups is a good idea too. This way, they can catch any abnormal lumps or spots early on^{2, 5}.

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Citations

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8. "What is atypical fibroxanthoma?. (n.d.). <https://dermnetnz.org/topics/atypical-fibroxanthoma>"