What is Merkel cell cancer?

Information for patients
Merkel cell cancers are a rare type of skin cancer. They develop in Merkel cells which are in the top layer of the skin.

These cells are near the nerve endings and they help us respond to touch. Merkel cell cancers are a rare type of neuroendocrine tumour.

The causes of merkel cell cancer

As with other types of skin cancer long term exposure to sunlight increases your risk of getting merkel cell cancer. 

**Other factors that can increase your risk include:**

- Ultraviolet light treatment, PUVA (psoralen ultra violet treatment), for skin conditions such as psoriasis.
- Conditions or treatments that can weaken your immune system, including people who have had an organ transplant.

The symptoms of merkel cell cancer

Merkel cell cancer usually appears as a lump on the skin. The lumps are usually bluish red in colour and about 1 to 5 cm across, although they are sometimes larger. The skin over them is not usually broken (ulcerated). They are most often found in the areas of the body that get the most direct sun – the head, neck, arms and legs. It can spread to other areas of the body.

Tests and staging for merkel cell cancer

Most people who are diagnosed with merkel cell carcinoma will need to have further tests to see if the cancer has spread.
You may be asked to have a:
• Chest X-ray
• Ultrasound scan
• CT scan, PET-CT scan or MRI scan.

Treatment for merkel cell cancer
If merkel cell cancer is only in the surface layers of skin, the main treatment is to remove it with surgery. This is a rare cancer so treatment should be carried out at a specialist skin cancer centre.

The team of doctors should include a:
• Skin cancer specialist (dermatologist)
• Plastic surgeon
• Clinical oncologist

They will aim to remove all of the cancer cells and you may hear them use the term clear margins. This means that all the signs of the cancer have been removed. To make sure of this, the surgeon will send the tissue that he or she has removed to the laboratory. A specialist will examine it very closely to make sure there is a clear margin of healthy tissue around all the cancerous tissue that has been removed. Your doctor will also be able to explain whether or not you need to have any lymph nodes removed and whether you will need any further treatment or scans afterwards.

It is quite common for specialists to recommend radiotherapy after surgery. The aim of the radiotherapy is to kill off any cancer cells that may have been left behind, but are too small to be seen. Occasionally radiotherapy may be used on its own.
Clinical Nurse Specialists – Skin Cancer (your key workers)

Your nurse specialists role is to act as a key point of contact for skin cancer patients and their carers, through diagnosis, treatment and follow up. We are available to provide emotional and psychological support, advice, education for patients. Individual appointments outside of the clinic environment can be made, which allows an opportunity to discuss and explain any information given, or to talk over treatment concerns/options.

Helen Nicholson  Tel: 0113 392 4378  Monday - Friday  
Email: helen.nicholson8@nhs.net

Ruth Scholefield  Tel 0113 392 4378  Tuesday - Friday  
Email: r.scholefield@nhs.net

Helen Jackson  Tel: 0113 206 7660  Monday - Thursday  
Email: helen.jackson37@nhs.net.

Beverley Ryder  Tel: 0113 206 7660/7708  
Email: beverley.ryder@nhs.net

Helen Nicholson and Ruth Scholefield are based in Chapel Allerton Hospital. Helen Jackson and Beverley Ryder are based at St James’s Hospital.

Information and advice

Leeds Cancer Support - we can be found in the information lounges in Bexley Wing and also in the purpose built Sir Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre on the St James’s Hospital site.

Information Lounge Level 1 Tel: (0113) 206 8816  
Information Lounge Level -2 Tel: (0113) 206 8940

Macmillan Cancer Support - Freephone 0808 808 0000, 9am-6pm Monday to Friday. Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Textphone service - deaf and hard of hearing on 0808 808 0121.