

Actinic Keratoses (Precancers) Topical Treatment and Skin Care

Actinic Keratoses are caused by sun damage; if left untreated some may go on to form a non melanoma type of skin cancer. Precancers are a warning sign and can be prevented by practicing good UV protection with hats, protective clothing, and again the daily use of sunscreen SPF 30 or higher. There are several ways to treat these actinic keratoses including liquid nitrogen cryotherapy “freezing”, curettage “scraping” or with topical creams. The negative side effects of cryotherapy and curettage are scarring (little white spots on the skin), pain and possible infection with the curettage.

Topical creams (Imiquimod, 5-fluorouracil) detect and treat very early lesions that are not visible to the naked eye and are easily applied to a whole area to rid the skin of precancers i.e. entire face. Precancer creams, like other treatments, cause the precancers to get scabby, broken down/eroded, swollen, and red in 1-2 weeks. Normal, healthy skin will not break down nor scab with these topical creams. All topical creams are to be applied before bed and in the morning wash face with a gentle cleanser i.e. Aveeno Moisturizing Bar Soap, followed by a fragrance-free moisturizer with sunscreen SPF 30 or higher and make up can be applied if desired.

Imiquimod (Aldara)

Imiquimod (Aldara) stimulates the immune system to seek and destroy sun damaged cells. Imiquimod is used 4 times a week at bedtime, for 3 weeks, and then after a few weeks break, the cycle is repeated once. Imiquimod was approved for use twice a week for 4 months, but many prefer the more aggressive and shorter routine.

5-fluorouracil (Efudex, Carac)

5-fluorouracil (Efudex, Carac) is a chemotherapy agent that is selectively taken up by precancers. 5-fluorouracil – Efudex and Carac are used at bedtime for 3 weeks. Both creams are more effective if the treatment cycle is repeated after a few weeks break.

What to Expect

Precancer creams, like other treatments, cause the precancers to get scabby, broken down/eroded, swollen, and red in 1-2 weeks. Skin healing time after stopping the creams may vary from 1 – 4 weeks. Precancer cream cause skin itching (Imiquimod) that can be treated with lotion, especially anti-itch lotions such as SARNA (often behind the pharmacy counter-ask the pharmacist to help locate). Scabbed skin heals faster with a topical antibiotic i.e. Bacitactin, Neosporin, or Bactroban (mupirocin). Systemic side effects are uncommon, but some describe flu-like symptoms such as fatigue. Skin may stay red or darken in the area of any treated precancers as a normal part of the healing process, this can be avoided by daily use of sunscreen SPF 30 or higher, reapplied regularly especially if outdoors, in the car, or near windows.

Please contact us at 206-236-3030 with any questions or concerns!