

Seborrheic Keratosis (SK)

A seborrheic keratosis is a common skin growth. This non-cancerous growth can grow quite thick and have a warty surface. It may seem worrisome because it can look like a wart, pre-cancerous skin growth (actinic keratosis), or skin cancer. Despite their appearance, seborrheic keratoses are harmless.

- Most people get these growths when they are middle aged or older. Because they begin at a later age and can have a wart-like appearance, seborrheic keratoses are often called the “barnacles of aging.”
- It’s possible to have just one of these growths, but most people develop several. Some growths may have a warty surface while others look like dabs of warm, brown candle wax on the skin.
- Seborrheic keratoses range in color from white to black; however, most are tan or brown.
- You can find these harmless growths anywhere on the skin, except the palms and soles. Most often, you’ll see them on the chest, back, head, or neck.

Signs and Symptoms

- Seborrheic keratoses tend to:
 - Start as small, rough bumps, then slowly thicken and develop a warty surface
 - Have a waxy, stuck-on-the-skin look
 - Be brown, though they range in color from white to black
 - Range in size from a fraction of an inch to larger than a half-dollar
 - Form on the chest, back, stomach, scalp, face, neck, or other parts of the body (but not on the palms and soles)
 - Cause no pain, though some itch

Causes

- The cause of seborrheic keratoses is unknown. We do know the following:
- **Seborrheic keratoses seem to run in families.** Some people seem to inherit a tendency to get many of these growths.
- **The sun may play a role in causing seborrheic keratoses.** Studies suggest that these growths develop on skin that's gotten lots of sun. Because these growths also develop on skin that's always covered, more research is needed.
- **Seborrheic keratoses are not contagious.** These growths may seem to multiply and spread to other parts of the body. What's really happening is that people get more of these growths as they age.

Diagnosing

- In most cases, a dermatologist can tell if your skin growth is a seborrheic keratosis by looking at it. Sometimes, a seborrheic keratosis can look like a skin cancer. If it does, the dermatologist will remove the growth so that it can be looked at under a microscope. This is the only way to tell for sure whether a growth is skin cancer.

Treatment

- Because seborrheic keratoses are harmless, they most often do not need treatment. A dermatologist may remove a seborrheic keratosis when it:
 - Looks like a skin cancer
 - Gets caught on clothing or jewelry

- Becomes irritated easily
- Seems unsightly to a patient
- **Shave:** If the growth looks like skin cancer, your dermatologist will likely shave off the growth with a blade after numbing the area with local lidocaine. This will allow a specially trained doctor to look for skin cancer cells under a microscope.
- **Cryotherapy:** The dermatologist applies liquid nitrogen, a very cold liquid, to the growth with a cotton swab or spray gun. This destroys the growth. The seborrheic keratosis tends to fall off within days. Sometimes a blister forms under the seborrheic keratosis and dries into a scab-like crust. The crust will fall off. Multiple treatments are sometimes necessary.
- **Electrosurgery and curettage:** Electrosurgery (electrocautery) involves numbing the growth with an anesthetic and using an electric current to destroy the growth. A scoop-shaped surgical instrument, a curette, is used to scrape off the treated growth. This is the curettage. The patient does not need stitches. There may be a small amount of bleeding. Sometimes the patient needs only electrosurgery or just curettage.

Outcome

- After removal of a seborrheic keratosis, the skin may be lighter than the surrounding skin. This usually fades with time. Sometimes it is permanent. Most removed seborrheic keratoses do not return. But a new one may occur elsewhere.

Tips for managing

- Most seborrheic keratoses do not require treatment. You should see a dermatologist if the growth:
 - Grows quickly, turns black, itches, or bleeds (possible signs of skin cancer)
 - Appears suddenly, along with many other new skin growths (possible sign of cancer inside the body)
 - Differs from what a typical seborrheic keratosis looks like
 - Looks dry, flat, rough, and scaly (it could be an actinic keratosis, which can progress to a type of skin cancer)
 - Becomes easily irritated, such as from shaving or clothes rubbing against it
- Do NOT try to remove a seborrheic keratosis yourself. There is a risk of infection.

Madeline Krauss, M.D. ● Pamela Norden M.D. ● Ellen Lacomis M.D.

Michael Bosworth, M.D. ● Deborah Goddard, M.D. ● Rebecca Droms, M.D. ● Jessica Suzanne Mosher M.D.

1 Washington Street, Suite 401 Wellesley Hills Ma 02481

Phone: 781-416-3500 Fax: 781-416-3505