

Actinic (solar) Keratoses

AKs are common sun induced keratotic (scaly) lesions which are considered to be pre-malignant with a low risk of conversion to a squamous cell carcinoma. Some may resolve spontaneously.

They appear as multiple flat or thickened, scaly or warty, skin coloured or erythematous skin lesions. They may develop into cutaneous horns. There may be more widespread evidence of sun damage (actinic field change) and the skin has a sand paper like feel.

The features which suggest transformation to a SCC are;

- a. Sudden growth, inflammation, tenderness or erythema at the base of the lesion.
- b. Bleeding or ulceration. It is worthwhile lifting off any thick scale to check for ulceration.

Sun advice

These lesions indicate solar damage and all patients should have advice about avoiding sun exposure and using sunscreens (at least SPF 20).

Management

These should be managed in primary care. The exceptions are;

1. Diagnostic uncertainty. These patients should be referred to dermatology where a diagnosis will be made & then discharged back to primary care for on-going treatment.
2. Where a SCC is suspected, patients should be referred as a 2 week wait.

Treatment

The aim is to destroy the damaged skin which is then replaced by deeper undamaged cells.

Discrete lesions

Cryotherapy is useful for a small number of thicker lesions.

5-Fluorouracil (Efudix) can be applied nightly for 4 weeks. Leave uncovered and wash off in the morning. It may cause significant erythema, so patients should be warned. It may be necessary to reduce the frequency of application. Patients must wash hands after application and should be reviewed 6 to 8 weeks after using the cream.

Field Change

3% diclofenac gel (Solaraze) is applied twice daily for up to 3 months. It is not usually irritating. Courses can be repeated and some patients may need to use it twice weekly, long term, to maintain control.

5 FU is also useful for more widespread actinic damage (see above). There are numerous regimes from twice weekly for 1 to 12 weeks through to nightly for 4 weeks.