AMERICAN ACADEMY of DERMATOLOGY / ASSOCIATION

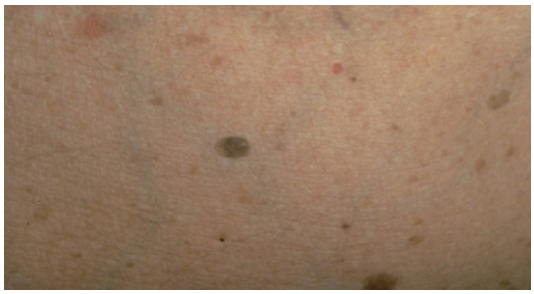
Dermatology Patient Education

Seborrheic Keratoses

Seborrheic keratoses (SKs) are common, benign (non-cancerous) skin growths. SKs can occur almost anywhere on the skin. While some people just get one SK, it is not unusual to have many of them. SKs are often associated with older age.

WHAT DOES AN SK LOOK LIKE?

It is easy to mistake an SK for other common skin growths such as warts or moles. Most SKs begin as a small, rough bump on the skin, though some can be smooth and flat. This bump tends to grow slowly and gradually thicken.



Seborrheic keratosis

SKs are often brown and range in color from light tan to black. Some SKs measure a fraction of an inch while others are larger than an inch.

SKs have one distinguishing trait to help you recognize them: They usually have a waxy, pasted-on-the-skin (or 'stuck-on') appearance. When you see an SK, it often looks like a dab of warm, candle wax on the skin.

This pasted-on-the-skin appearance makes SKs look like they can be easily removed with a fingernail. You should not try this. Doing so can lead to irritation, a scar and potentially an infection.

WHAT CAUSES SKS?

Researchers are studying what causes SKs. SKs are not contagious and, tend to run in families.

SKs form both on skin that gets sun exposure and skin that gets little, if any, sun. Therefore, more research is needed to determine if sun exposure plays a role in causing SKs. Estrogen is also being investigated as a cause of SKs, since SKs can suddenly appear when a woman's estrogen levels quickly rise or fall, such as during pregnancy and when stopping estrogen therapy.

WHO GETS SKS?

While anyone may develop SKs, these growths generally first appear in middle age or later. Children rarely develop SKs.

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WHERE DO SKS APPEAR ON THE BODY?

SKs can form anywhere on the skin. Most SKs form on the chest, back, scalp, face, and neck. They do not form on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet.

Seborrheic keratosis

WHAT SKIN GROWTHS ARE MISTAKEN FOR SKS?

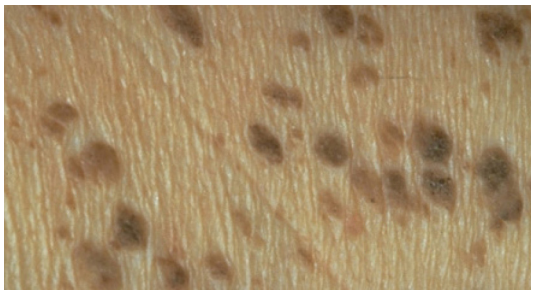
It is important to know that SKs can look like other common skin growths. When a new growth appears on your skin, you should see your dermatologist for a diagnosis. What may look like just another SK could be a:

- **Wart:** Although warts are generally harmless, they are caused by a virus and can spread. Dermatologists often recommend treatment, especially when you cannot get rid of it, the wart hurts, or you have many warts.
- **Mole:** It is normal for new moles to appear during childhood and adolescence. By the time you reach 30 years of age, you usually have all the moles that will develop. If a new mole forms or an existing mole starts changing, itching, or bleeding, immediately make an appointment to see your dermatologist. You could have skin cancer, which when detected early and treated properly can be cured.
- **Actinic keratosis (AK):** This growth is flatter and rougher than an SK. AKs are caused by years of sun exposure and are considered precancerous. Your dermatologist should examine all growths and patches of skin that feel dry, scaly, and rough.
- **Melanoma:** This is a type of skin cancer that can be deadly without early treatment. Melanoma can look just like an SK. Both can grow quickly and become very dark and irregular in shape. If you have a growth that changes, itches or bleeds, immediately make an appointment to see your dermatologist. Caught early, melanoma can be successfully treated.

HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST TREAT SKS?

SKs are benign, so treatment is generally not necessary. Dermatologists do recommend removing an SK that:

- Grows quickly
- Turns black
- Itches
- Bleeds



Multiple seborrheic keratoses

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These are potential signs and symptoms of skin cancer. If you have any of these signs or symptoms, immediately make an appointment to see a dermatologist.

During the appointment, your dermatologist will examine the growth and may consider removing it. If your dermatologist suspects that it could be skin cancer, the removed growth will be sent to a lab for further diagnosis.

If you suddenly develop numerous, itchy SKs, you also should see a dermatologist. This can be a sign of a serious health problem.

Some patients ask to remove SKs that are:

- Large
- Easily irritated by clothing or jewelry
- Considered unsightly

Check with your insurance company before asking your dermatologist to remove an SK. Removal of SKs may be considered an elective cosmetic procedure and therefore may not be covered by your carrier.

To remove an SK, your dermatologist may use:

- **Cryosurgery**
  An in-office procedure that freezes the SK, causing it to fall off within days.
  Sometimes a blister forms beneath the treated SK. As the blister dries, it turns into a scab-like crust that falls off.

  You may see a small dark or light spot on the skin where you had the SK. This usually fades with time. A permanent white spot is a possible side effect of this treatment, especially if you have a darker complexion.
- **Electrosurgery and/or curettage**
  An in-office procedure that involves using an electric current to cauterize (burn) the SK. Your dermatologist may also use a scoop-shaped instrument, a curette, to remove the treated SK. Stitches are not necessary.

A dermatologist is a medical doctor who specializes in treating the medical, surgical and cosmetic conditions of the skin, hair and nails. To learn more about seborrheic keratoses, visit aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376) to find a dermatologist in your area.

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