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Surgical Treatment for Early Melanoma

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

A melanoma diagnosis is always frightening. But knowing what to expect during treatment can give the patient a valuable sense of control and confidence.

Surgical excision is the standard approach for localized melanoma. A larger excision is needed than for less serious basal cell and squamous cell cancers to ensure the whole lesion is removed. Some normal-looking surrounding skin is also removed. The width of this border of normal skin depends on the lesion's depth. Additional tissue is removed under the melanoma. Depending on the lesion's thickness, local lymph nodes may be evaluated. As with any cancerous growth, the goal is to "get it all" before it spreads.

When the melanoma is on the face or other highly visible areas, the patient's anxiety is often heightened by concerns about scarring. To help minimize scarring, the surgeon carefully studies relaxed skin tension lines in the relevant areas. If the excision site is small, it can typically be closed with a linear scar. If it's larger or on the face, hands or feet, it may be necessary to rearrange local skin (a skin flap), or use more distant tissue as a flap (attached) or a graft (unattached) to close the wound. Typically, flaps are preferable since local skin is a better match, may be more durable and avoids creating a scar at the donor site.

The type of anesthetic used depends on the size and location of the melanoma. Surgery on small, localized melanomas may require only local anesthetic, while general anesthesia may be required for larger lesions.

Recovery period depends on the location and extent of surgery. The wound may take longer to heal if reconstructive surgery such as skin grafts are used. After surgery, topical scar treatments, primarily with silicone gel as a key ingredient, can effectively minimize scarring if used as directed.

Close, regular follow up with a dermatologist is crucial to screen for new growths or recurrences. Basic screening blood tests are typically performed and consultation with an oncologist is often recommended though for a localized melanoma, no further treatment beyond removal is indicated.

Of course, the best way to deal with skin cancer is to prevent it. The few moments it takes to apply daily sun block before venturing out into Florida's strong sunshine can literally save your life.

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