

# Skin Cancer and Mohs Surgery

By Nathan W. Hanson, MD

**S**kin cancer is more common than most think and it is increasing each year. More than 3.5 million cases of skin cancer in 2 million individuals are diagnosed yearly. Over the past 31 years, more cases of skin cancer have been diagnosed than all other types of cancer combined. In fact, one in five Americans will be diagnosed at some point in life with some form of skin cancer.

Increased ultraviolet light exposure, from both natural and artificial sources (tanning beds), along with increased awareness and diagnosis, has contributed to the rising incidence of skin cancer. Here in the Intermountain West, we are particularly susceptible to skin cancer because of our love of the outdoors, the sunny environment, and our high altitude living.

**Skin cancer comes in multiple varieties and not all skin cancer is melanoma.** Melanoma is the third most common form of skin cancer but accounts for nearly 75 percent of all skin-cancer deaths. More common and rarely life threatening forms of skin cancer include basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma. Both basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma can be treated with Mohs micrographic surgery.

**Mohs micrographic surgery** is a technique developed by Dr. Frederic Mohs in Wisconsin in the 1940s and has been continuously refined over the last 70 years. Mohs surgery allows nearly 100 percent microscopic visualization of the skin cancer margins, making possible very high cure rates (98-99 percent) for new skin cancers while leaving

smaller wound sizes when compared to standard excision techniques. In other words, this procedure allows your dermatologist to both analyze and efficiently remove skin cancers. The surgery is performed under local anesthesia and offers patients the confidence that their cancer has been effectively treated.

**Treatment of skin cancer is vitally important and the earlier that treatment takes place, the better.** Skin cancer, when caught early and treated appropriately, is very often curable. While there are alternatives to surgical procedures for some forms of skin cancer if caught early enough, most methods of treatment include some form of surgery.

If Mohs surgery is deemed appropriate you should seek care from a Mohs surgeon who is a member of the American College of Mohs Surgery. A Mohs surgeon receives extensive training in a fellowship program that goes beyond normal dermatology residency.

To make an appointment with a dermatologist near you visit [intermountainmedicalgroup.org](http://intermountainmedicalgroup.org).

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## Factors that can contribute to your risk of skin cancer

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- Previously treated for skin cancer
- Family history of skin cancer, especially melanoma
- Lots of moles, irregular moles, or large moles
- Freckles that burn before tanning
- Fair skin, blue or green eyes, or blond, red, or light brown hair
- Spend a lot of time outdoors
- Live or vacation at high altitudes (UV radiation increases as the level goes up)
- Live or vacation in tropical or subtropical climates
- Work indoors all week and then get intense sun exposure on weekends
- Take medicines that lower your immunity
- Have certain autoimmune diseases, such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE, or "lupus")
- Have had an organ transplant
- Take oral contraceptives (birth control pills)

*Ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about the risk of any medicines you may be taking that could increase your sensitivity to sunlight.*

