

“Yipes! What’s That On My Nose?”

By Dr. Lillian Soohoo, M.D., Dermatologist

Are wrinkles and brown spots inevitable signs of aging skin? Not always. I like to remind patients that certain areas of the skin that tend to remain covered by clothing for most of one’s life-- such as the breasts and buttocks-- often look remarkably free of any unsightly changes.

So, how do we get all those unwanted barnacles, brown spots and wrinkles as we age? Let’s discuss some skin changes which appear as an individual reaches 50 years of age.

Large freckles or solar lentigines commonly appear on the face and gradually increase in number and size over time. These can be quite alarming and a patient’s concern that these facial brown spots represent skin cancer often prompts a visit to the dermatologist.

Solar lentigines result from excessive sun exposure, which in turn stimulates the overproduction of melanin, causing freckling. Since some types of skin cancer, particularly lentigo maligna melanoma, can look similar to a large freckle, any new or enlarging brown spot on the face should be evaluated by a dermatologist.

Seborrheic Keratoses or “barnacles” are another extremely common skin finding in older adults and can be quite numerous on all areas of the body, especially the chest, back and face. Some individuals may have 50 or more of these brown, warty growths which can grow up to 1 inch in diameter and also be a source of

cosmetic concern.

Women may notice these lesions underneath their breasts and or on the skin under the bra straps. If located on the trunk along the waistline or bra strap areas, these barnacles can become quite irritated, painful and may bleed onto clothing.

Not necessarily related to sun exposure, many people have a family history of these warty skin lesions. Some seborrheic keratoses develop directly from longstanding freckles that thicken over time.

All seborrheic keratoses are generally benign and have no potential for cancer but can still be a cause for concern due to their cosmetic appearance and potential for irritation if chronically rubbed by clothing. They’re easily treated by liquid nitrogen spray or surgical excision but these treatments are typically not covered by Medicare which deems these as elective or cosmetic procedures.

Precancerous spots or actinic keratoses

The term “actinic” is derived from the Greek word “aktis” or ray. In this case, an actinic keratosis is caused by the sun’s rays and represents a precancerous skin lesion. It often appears as a pink scaly patch that doesn’t heal over weeks to months and may be tender to the touch.

Most commonly seen on the sun-exposed areas of the face, scalp, ears, hands and forearms, many patients have several of these treated at a time since they



result from a lifetime of sun damage. Early recognition and treatment of actinic keratoses is important, since 10 to 15 percent of these may progress to overt skin cancer, typically squamous cell carcinoma.

Skin changes over a lifetime are generally related to environmental factors; the most important being the amount of sun exposure an individual has had over time, and to a lesser extent, the genetic factors which determine our skin color and vulnerability to the sun (i.e., lighter skin types are more susceptible to the harmful effects of sunlight).

However, no matter what your skin type, these changes can be largely prevented by conscientious sun protection of your skin.

Even after age 50, wearing sunscreen, hats and protective clothing will significantly help to decrease the total lifetime dose of ultraviolet radiation exposure which will reduce your skin cancer risk. Surveillance skin exams and treatment of all suspicious or concerning skin lesions can be effectively achieved

by regular visits to your dermatologist, at least annually for a total body skin exam.

As I tell my own patients, "You are not expected to make a diagnosis; however, you should be aware of what is new and changing on your skin, and feel free to come in for a checkup if you are in doubt." The goal of a dermatologist is to help you achieve optimal skin health and well-being.

Dr. Soohoo is a Board Certified dermatologist who has been in private practice in the Silicon Valley for over 16 years. Her dermatology practice is located at The Menkes Clinic in Mountain View. 650.962.4619. Menkesclinic.com. Dr. Soohoo specializes in general, cosmetic and pediatric dermatology and is also on the clinical faculty of Stanford Medical School.



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