Patient information factsheet

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC / Rodent Ulcer) of the Eyelids

What is a basal cell carcinoma?

Basal cell carcinoma is generally abbreviated to BCC. A BCC is also known as a rodent ulcer. It is a very slow growing cancer of the skin that often affects the eyelids. Its growth is so slow that it virtually never spreads elsewhere in the body. However, if it is not treated it will continue to grow slowly and eventually destroy the surrounding tissue causing ulceration.

What are the aims of surgery?

The first aim of surgery is to completely remove the BCC. A small margin of normal looking skin is also cut out to ensure that any microscopic extensions of the BCC are also removed.

The next aim is to repair the eyelid in a way that allows it to function as normally as possible so that the eye remains healthy.

Finally the surgeon will try to repair the lid so that it looks as normal as possible.

How is this done?

The skin containing the lump is cut out. If the BCC is very close to the edge of the eyelid, it will be necessary to remove a full thickness section of the eyelid in order to completely remove the growth. The eyelid is then repaired generally using stitches that dissolve and do not require removal.

If the gap after removing the lump is large, it may be necessary to rearrange some of the surrounding looser skin to close the gap or to use a skin graft from another area such as the upper eyelid(s) or from near the ear. You will be told before surgery if this may be necessary.

Will a biopsy be taken?

Sometimes a biopsy is necessary, a few weeks before the main operation. This is to confirm the diagnosis and allow more detailed planning of the operation. The biopsy is done in the minor operating department under local anaesthetic and will only take about 15-20 minutes. A follow up appointment will be arranged to discuss the result with you.

What type of anaesthetic will I have?

Generally the operation will be done under local anaesthetic. Numbing drops will be put in your eye and then local anaesthetic will be injected into the affected area of the eyelid. This causes stinging for 10 – 20 seconds and the lid will then be numb. You will remain awake throughout the procedure. You can eat and drink normally on the day of operation.
Please wear loose, comfortable, washable clothes - you will not need to change before the operation.

**When will the operation be done?**

Usually within two months of going on the waiting list. You will be contacted to arrange a date and time for the surgery. Please let us know of any holiday dates and changes of address or telephone number.

**What will happen on the day of surgery?**

Before the operation, the surgeon will want to check that your lump is still present. You will be asked to sign a consent form, which will include your permission for the lump to be tested in the pathology laboratory. The lab will keep the tissue; it will not be returned to you.

You will lie on a couch and the skin will be cleaned with antiseptic and drapes positioned around the area to be operated on. The lump will be marked with washable ink and then the anaesthetic injection given. The lump will be cut out, bleeding stopped and the eyelid repaired with stitches.

At the end of the operation, antibiotic ointment will be put in the eye and on the stitches. You will usually be given antibiotic drops or ointment to use three times a day until your next appointment. An eye pad will be put on your eye (unless you have no sight in the other eye). You will be told when you can remove the pad - usually after about two hours. After it is put in the eye, the ointment may blur your vision a little for a short while.

Sometimes a bolster is used to help a skin graft or flap stay in place. This is a small pad of cotton wool soaked in antiseptic and secured onto the graft with stitches. It will usually be removed after a week or so; please do not try to remove it yourself.

**What happens after the operation?**

You will be taken to a comfortable chair for a short rest and a cup of tea before you go home. A nurse will give you any instructions you need. You should not drive home, nor should you drive until your eye feels comfortable and your vision is clear again. You should take it easy for the rest of the day. You may need a day or two off work - if you need a certificate, please ask the surgeon.

You will need to ensure you have a follow up appointment arranged - usually 1-3 weeks later – before you leave the unit. Usually the result from the lab will be available at the appointment.

**After you leave hospital**

The eye pad will help to reduce bruising and swelling and the staff will tell you when you should remove the pad. Do not worry if there is some blood on the eye pad when you remove it. Clean the eyelids gently with cooled, boiled water and cotton wool or tissues. Use the ointment on the treated part of the eyelid for about a week.
If your eye feels sore when the anaesthetic wears off, take simple painkillers like Paracetamol or Ibuprofen. Normally, the discomfort will settle within one or two days. It is normal for the eyelids to appear swollen and bruised for some time after this operation. If you have SEVERE pain, not relieved by simple painkillers, please ring the Eye Short Stay Unit or Eye Casualty for advice (see below).

- If no stitches have been used: A small scab may form on the treated part of your eyelid. When this drops off, in about ten days time, new skin will have formed underneath. This may look pink to begin with but will then fade to be like the rest of the eyelid skin.

- If stitches have been used: The surgeon will normally use dissolving stitches in your eyelid. These do not need to be removed but they may take weeks to months to disappear completely. Small pieces of stitch may drop off at this stage, when you clean your eye.

- If non-dissolving sutures have been used they will be taken out at your next appointment.

If you have any queries following your treatment, please contact us on the following telephone numbers:

- Eye Short Stay Unit 023 8079 8600
- Eye Casualty 023 8079 6592 (Anytime - 24 hour service)
- Outpatient appointments 023 8079 6555

For a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8079 4688.