

What is lentigo maligna?

Lentigo maligna is due to the abnormal growth of pigment cells in the skin, called melanocytes. These cells spread horizontally along the top layer of the skin for many years before they penetrate to deeper layers. When the cells grow into the deeper layers of the skin they tend to become cancerous and may develop into a potentially serious skin cancer called a malignant melanoma.

What are the clinical features of lentigo maligna?

Lentigo maligna is most often found in people aged over 65. The most common site is the face, especially the cheek but they may develop at any sun-exposed site. The typical picture of lentigo maligna is of a flat, brown, irregularly shaped patch of skin. They grow slowly outwards from the edges. The colours within the patch vary from light tan to brown or black. There are often two or more colours within the skin lesions.

What causes a lentigo maligna?

Patients with fair skin types are more likely to develop lentigo maligna and this risk is significantly increased by exposure to sunlight. This exposure may have occurred many years before. They are commonly seen in patients that have had an outdoor job, lived overseas, or in those that enjoy outdoor pursuits like gardening or golf.

Why do they need to be treated?

Lentigo maligna have the potential to develop into a more serious form of skin cancer called a malignant melanoma. The risk of such change is thought to be about 10% (1 in 10 will develop cancerous change). This type of skin cancer can be life-threatening and because of this, early treatment is normally recommended.

What treatments are available?

The preferred treatment of lentigo maligna is skin surgery although we occasionally use cryotherapy freezing and topical creams (Aldara®).

Skin Surgery:

This involves an operation under local anaesthetic and stitches will be necessary. Larger lesions may need a skin flap or a skin graft. Frequently, treatment is difficult because the patch of abnormal pigmentation is large and because the abnormal pigment cells extend beyond the abnormal looking skin, making complete removal impossible. Under such circumstances, it may be more appropriate to treat the lentigo maligna with cryotherapy (freezing) and regular follow up in clinic.

Aldara® (Imiquinod):

This special cream activates the immune system to remove the abnormal skin cells. Cream is generally applied once daily for 6-12 weeks. It can produce an intense inflammation in the skin and may make the skin lesion look worse before it improves. Some people develop flu-like symptoms applying the cream.

What changes should I look out for?

It is important to watch for darker pigmentation and the growth of lumps/nodules within the patch of pigmented skin. If you notice any changes, ask your GP to refer you urgently for an appointment. Alternatively, telephone our helpline 01273 764253.

Can I do anything to help the skin problem?

It is also advisable to avoid sun exposure by covering up with light clothing, use of a wide-brimmed hat, and by wearing a high Sun Protection Factor (SPF>25) sunscreen.