Surgical Treatment of Skin Cancer

Electrodessication and curettage (aka, ‘ED&C’) and excision are the two most common procedures dermatologists perform for the treatment of skin cancer. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages.

Electrodessication and Curettage

ED&C is sometimes nicknamed ‘scraping and burning’. It’s performed by first numbing the skin and then using a tool called a curette to separate ('scrape') the skin cancer cells from the surrounding tissue. The reason this is effective is because skin cancer cells don’t adhere to the surrounding tissue quite as well as normal, healthy cells.

After the abnormal cells are removed, a tool called an ‘electrodesiccator’ is used to apply heat the site. Doing so helps to both further loosen the skin cancer cells from the surrounding tissue and also helps to control bleeding. It’s this heat which results in the ‘burning’ described in its nickname.

The advantages of ED&C include...

• It’s relatively quick (often complete within 10-15 minutes).
• No sutures are required.

The disadvantages of ED&C include...

• It can’t be used on all types of skin cancer or on all locations.
  o Deeper skin cancers (or those on the face) usually need to be excised.
• A follow-up biopsy for ‘clear margins’ isn’t sent to the lab.
  o Since the residual skin cancer is ‘scraped and burned away’ (rather than cut out), there is nothing for the lab to examine. We simply monitor for recurrence.
• It actually takes a little longer to heal than excision.
• Creates a faint, round ‘white scar’ which some may find more noticeable than the thin ‘line-type’ of scar created by excision.
**Excision**

Excision is what *most* people think of when it comes to skin cancer surgery. Although it sounds like a major surgery, it really isn’t. Instead, it’s easily performed in our office as an outpatient procedure.

As with all skin cancer treatments, the site is first anesthetized with numbing medication so that no pain or discomfort is felt. The skin cancer is then completely *excised* (or ‘cut out’).

![Skin cancer is completely excised from the skin.](image)

Because both the surface and deeper layers of skin around the skin cancer site are removed, stitches are needed in order for the site to heal.

![Wound is closed with sutures.](image)

**The advantages of excision include...**

- It’s able to treat more types of skin cancers and is suitable for nearly all locations.
- The removed skin cancer tissue can be sent to the lab to check for ‘clear margins’.
- A sutured wound actually heals faster than a non-sutured wound (such as ED&C).

**The disadvantages of excision include...**

- Compared to ED&C, there’s slightly increased risk of blood vessel or nerve damage since the deeper layers of skin are involved.
- The skin surrounding the excision site may feel tighter – at least until it has time to stretch and accommodate the change.
- Extra care must be taken in the weeks after surgery to prevent the sutures from breaking and the wound opening before fully-healed.
- Excision takes longer. Patients can expect to be in the office for as long as 1-2 hours to allow time for prepping, the excision to be performed, and final bandage placement.

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