

Actinic Keratosis (AK)

Actinic keratosis (AK) is a red, rough, scaly lesion on the skin caused by long-term exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun or tanning beds. AKs commonly appear on sun-exposed areas such as the face, scalp, ears, hands, and forearms. Patients often scratch off these lesions and notice that they recur over time. They are precancerous lesions, meaning they can sometimes develop into skin cancer if left untreated.

Although many AKs remain stable, some can progress to squamous cell carcinoma, a type of skin cancer. Treating AKs reduces this risk and improves overall skin health.

Your dermatologist will recommend treatment based on the number, location, and severity of these lesions. In-office treatment may include cryotherapy (freezing) which uses liquid nitrogen to destroy the abnormal cells. This is particularly useful when AKs are limited in number. However, when there are many AKs, at-home or field therapies are often necessary. These include topical medications such as 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) and imiquimod creams. These medications are often applied once or twice daily to affected areas for several weeks (discuss treatment protocol with your dermatologist).

It is important to note that redness, crusting, and irritation are common during treatment and are expected signs that the medication is working. After treatment has been completed, apply topical Aquaphor or Vaseline to aid in the healing process (continue until scabbing has resolved).

If lesions grow or do not resolve despite treatment with cryotherapy or topical medications, a biopsy may be warranted. Report these lesions to your dermatologist.

Speak to your dermatologist to learn more about treatment options.