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Patient Education: Understanding Actinic Keratoses

What are Actinic Keratoses?

Actinic keratoses (AKs) are rough, scaly patches that form on the skin due to long-term exposure to the sun. They are also known as solar keratoses and are considered precancerous, meaning they have the potential to develop into skin cancer if left untreated.

Who is at Risk?

- Individuals with fair skin, light-colored hair, and light eyes.
- Those who spend a lot of time in the sun without adequate protection.
- People over the age of 40.
- Individuals with a history of frequent or severe sunburns.

Where Do They Appear?

AKs commonly appear on sun-exposed areas of the body, including:

- Face
- Ears
- Lips
- Scalp
- Neck
- Backs of the hands
- Forearms

Signs and Symptoms

- Rough, dry, or scaly patch of skin, usually less than 1 inch in diameter.
- Flat to slightly raised patch or bump on the top layer of skin.
- In some cases, a hard, wart-like surface.
- Color can vary from pink to red or brown.
- Itching or burning sensation in the affected area.

Why Are They Important?

Actinic keratoses are important to identify and treat because they can develop into squamous cell carcinoma, a type of skin cancer. Early detection and treatment can prevent this progression.

Prevention Tips

- **Sun Protection:** Use broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher. Reapply every two hours, or more often if swimming or sweating.
- **Protective Clothing:** Wear hats, sunglasses, and long sleeves when outdoors.
- **Avoid Peak Sun Hours:** Try to stay out of the sun between 10 AM and 4 PM when the rays are strongest.
- **Regular Skin Checks:** Perform self-examinations monthly and schedule regular check-ups with your healthcare provider.

Treatment Options

Treatment may vary depending on the number and location of the AKs:

- **Cryotherapy:** Freezing the lesion with liquid nitrogen.
- **Topical Treatments:** Prescription creams or gels that help remove the affected skin.
- **Photodynamic Therapy:** Using light and a special chemical to destroy the abnormal cells.
- **Curettage and Desiccation:** Scraping off the lesion and using heat or chemicals to destroy remaining cells.

When to See a Doctor

Consult your doctor if you notice:

- New or changing skin lesions.
- Lesions that bleed, itch, or become tender.
- Any rapid changes in an existing lesion.

Remember: Early detection and prevention are key to managing actinic keratoses effectively. Protect your skin and schedule regular check-ups to ensure any changes are addressed promptly.