

Actinic keratosis



What is actinic keratosis?

Actinic keratoses are spots on the skin caused by damage from sunlight. These spots occur on parts of the body that have often been in the sun. They mainly occur in the face and on the backs of the hand and can signal the onset of skin cancer.

What does actinic keratosis look like?

Actinic keratoses usually look like rough spots on the skin. The colour is usually skin-coloured to red or brown. The size can vary from a few millimetres to a few centimetres. The spots are mainly located on:

- The face
- The scalp
- The back of the hands
- The lower half of the arms
- The décolleté (chest) in women

At the start, it is easier to feel the spots than see them. People with actinic keratoses often say that hard skin flakes repeatedly develop in the same place. Sometimes the spots are sensitive when touched. Often there are multiple spots visible.

How do you get actinic keratoses?

You get actinic keratoses because of exposure to the sun or sunbeds. In addition to the amount of sun you have been exposed to, your skin type is also important. Someone with light skin (blonde/red hair and blue eyes) is more likely to have actinic keratoses than

someone with dark skin and dark hair. The older you are, the more risk you have of getting actinic keratoses. Up to 80% of people over the age of 60 with a light skin have actinic keratoses.

How does your doctor know if you have actinic keratosis?

Your doctor can see from the spots on your skin whether you have actinic keratoses. Sometimes your doctor will want to confirm that it is not a different type of skin condition. In that case, the doctor will remove a small skin sample (biopsy) and have this examined. Local anaesthetic will be used before removing a skin sample.

Do you need to be treated for actinic keratosis?

There are a number of reasons for treatment:

- It bothers you: Some people get itchy or irritation. Others have cosmetic concerns.
- In order to reduce the risk of developing skin cancer: Having actinic keratoses, as well as sun-damaged skin, means you are more prone to skin cancer. This damage is caused by all the excess sunlight your skin has been exposed to from birth until now. If you have had lots of sunburn in the past, this also increases the risk of skin cancer.

What treatments are there for actinic keratoses?

There are several options:

Freezing

The doctor will freeze the spots with liquid nitrogen. This is usually done only if you have a single spot on your skin. Sometimes, a white discolouration will occur on the spot where the skin has been frozen.

Cream / gel (imiquimod, ingenol-mebutate or 5-fluorouracil)

Your doctor will prescribe a cream or gel if you have lots of spots on your skin. The cream or gel must be applied on your skin for several days to a few weeks, according to the doctor's instructions. The cream or gel destroys the actinic keratoses. At first, it may seem as if the actinic keratosis gets worse before you see any improvement. However, it will have disappeared completely after the treatment.

Photodynamic treatment

If you have lots of spots on your skin or have very large spots, the doctor may also decide to prescribe a 'photodynamic treatment' (officially called PDT). This means that a special cream is applied to the actinic keratoses, which makes the restless cells sensitive to light. A few hours later, a special lamp exposes the actinic keratoses to light, thus destroying the actinic keratoses. This treatment can sometimes be painful. You may still experience pain the day after the treatment. After this treatment, the treated skin will look worse before it starts to look better.

Other treatments

Sometimes other types of treatment are chosen, such as chemical peeling, ablative laser, curettage or daylight PDT.

What else can you do?

- When you go out in the sun, protect your skin by wearing long-sleeved clothing and wear a hat or cap, for example;

- Do not use sunbeds;
- Use a sun cream with a high protection factor (factor 20 or higher).
- Remember that a sunscreen (also called sun protection cream or sun milk) is not intended to let you stay longer in the sun, but to protect the skin when you are in the sun.

How big is the risk of getting skin cancer?

Over the years, as mentioned above, actinic keratoses can develop into a skin cancer. This type of skin cancer is called the squamous cell carcinoma (see also the leaflet 'Squamous cell carcinoma'). You can ask your doctor for this leaflet or download it from www.huidarts.info. These spots are usually thicker and painful. The risk of getting skin cancer is estimated at 5 to 10%.

New actinic keratoses can develop at any time. If your skin has been damaged by the sun in the past, this damage will always be there. People who have lots of actinic keratoses are advised to have these spots checked and treated by the doctor at regular intervals throughout their lives.

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