

Actinic Keratoses (Precancer) Topical Treatment and Skin Care

Actinic keratoses are caused by sun damage accumulated over time. If left untreated some AKs may turn into squamous cell type skin cancer. Precancers are a warning sign and can be prevented by practicing good UV protection with hats, protective clothing, and again the daily use of sunscreen SPF 30 or higher. There are several ways to treat these actinic keratoses including prescription creams, liquid nitrogen cryotherapy (“freezing”) and/or photodynamic therapy (PDT). The negative side effects of cryotherapy and curettage are pain or scarring (little white spots on the skin), and with PDT redness or swelling.

Topical creams (5-fluorouracil, imiquimod, diclofenac and ingenol mebutate) help detect and treat very early lesions that are not visible to the naked eye and are easily applied to a whole area (eg entire face or scalp) to rid the skin of precancer cells. Using a prescription cream in combination with cryotherapy or photodynamic therapy may provide a higher treatment cure. Precancer creams, like other treatments, cause the precancers to get scabby, broken down/eroded, swollen and red in 1-2 weeks. Normal, healthy skin will not break nor scab with these topical.

5-fluorouracil (Brands Efudex and Carac)

- 5-fluorouracil is a generic medication. It is a chemotherapy agent that destroys precancer cells.
- 5-fluorouracil is used every night over lotion for 2-3 weeks, break for a week then repeat at bedtime for another 2-3 weeks. Breaks are used to reduce the risk of irritation.

Imiquimod (Brands Zyclara and Aldara)

- Imiquimod has generic and brand formulations. It stimulates the skin immune system to seek and destroy precancer cells.
- Zyclara (3.75% imiquimod) is used every night for 2 weeks, break for 2 weeks, 2 weeks on again then stop. Breaks are used to reduce the risk of irritation.
- Aldara or generic 5% imiquimod is used every night 4 times a week for 2-3 weeks, break for a week then repeat for another 2-3 weeks. Breaks help reduce the risk of irritation.

Diclofenac (Brand Solaraze)

- Diclofenac (Solaraze) is a anti inflammatory agent that slowly “starves” the precancer cells.
- Solaraze is very gentle and every night for 6 months or twice daily for 3 months.
If cost is over \$120.00 or if Prior Auth is needed, disregard rx and purchase here

Ingenol Mebutate (Brand Picato)

- Picato is indicated for topical treatment of actinic keratosis
- Picato 0.015% gel is used on the face and scalp once daily for 3 consecutive days
- Picato 0.05% gel is used on the trunk, arms and legs once daily for 2 consecutive days

What to Expect

Side effects can be redness, scabbing, swelling or discomfort only in the area of the AKs which usually will resolve in 1-2 weeks. Normal, healthy skin will not be affected. Apply a thin layer of the topical medication in the evening, then in the morning wash skin with a gentle cleanser, followed by a fragrance-free moisturizer with sunscreen SPF 30 or higher and make up can be applied if desired. In the event of increasing skin irritation, take a break from using for 1 week and then restart. Crusted or scabbed skin heals faster with a topical antibiotic i.e. Bacitracin, Neosporin, or Bactroban (mupirocin). Systemic side effects are uncommon, but some describe flu-like symptoms such as fatigue. Skin may stay red or darken in the area of any treated precancers as a normal part of the healing process, this can be avoided by daily use of sunscreen SPF 30 or higher, reapplied regularly especially if outdoors, in the car, or near windows.

