

5-FLUORACIL (5-FU, EFUDEX, OR FLUOROPLEX) TREATMENT

Why should I treat this skin problem?

Your doctor has noted that you have multiple actinic keratoses. These are pre-cancerous skin lesions, meaning that some of these may possibly develop into skin cancers. It is much better and easier for you to treat these now **before** they turn into cancers.

What will happen during treatment?

The process of destroying these numerous pre-cancerous areas is not pleasant. The involved spots will burn and become red, blistered, and eroded or ulcerated, and covered with scabs. This unpleasant reaction must occur for treatment to be successful. It will start about 3-5 days after the beginning of treatment and continue throughout treatment. The skin may take several weeks after finishing treatment before it returns to normal. Therefore, this therapy should be planned so that it does not occur at inappropriate times. Any burning and pain can be controlled with pain medications.

The cosmetic results are usually excellent. Your skin will appear smoother than it does now due both to elimination of the actinic keratoses and an anti-wrinkling effect. Occasionally, the skin may become temporarily darker or red in the pre-cancerous areas. This should fade within a few months.

Are there alternative therapies?

Liquid nitrogen can be used to freeze off these lesions, causing a blister at each spot frozen. When there are multiple actinic keratoses, this treatment may be impractical. The use of 5-fluorouracil (Efidex or Fluoroplex) allows easier treatment. It has the added benefit of treating these pre-cancerous lesions even before they are big enough to be detected by you or your doctor. This medication has a specific attraction to these pre-cancerous areas, destroying the “bad” cells much earlier in their development than is possible with other treatments. You can “pay now” with a small scab or delay treatment and “pay later” with a much bigger scab or even a skin cancer.

Deep “chemical peels” done for the usual purpose of treating wrinkles can also remove actinic keratoses. This type of treatment is not selective for treatment of actinic keratoses, however. Chemical peels cause much more massive erosion of skin, more pain, and a far worse appearance during the month or so after the procedure. However, deeper chemical peels have more long-lasting, anti-wrinkling effect than does 5-FU treatment. Unfortunately, most insurance companies will not pay for chemical peels because of the cosmetic uses of chemical peels.

Directions:

Apply only to the areas specified by your doctor. Wash the affected area before applying the 5-FU. Use a non-metal applicator, gloved hand, or fingers (followed by handwashing). Do not apply immediately before bedtime since contact with pillows and bedding may cause undesirable spreading of the medicine.

Face: Apply a very thin layer of 1% cream twice per day, avoiding the eyelids and the fold between the nose and mouth. Irritation will begin in 3-5 days. Continue use until significant ulceration and necrosis occur, usually 3-4 weeks. Return to see your dermatologist two to three weeks after stopping treatment for advice on how much longer to continue therapy. Stopping too early will result in treatment failure.

Lips: Apply 1% cream only if directed to by your dermatologist. Follow the instructions above.

Arms, scalp, back, or chest: If directed to include any of these areas, you will use the 5% cream twice per day. Irritation usually begins within 4-6 days on the forearms, Continue treatment until ulceration and necrosis occur, On the arms and hands, this may take 6-10 weeks. Return to see your dermatologist 2-3 weeks after the spots begin to get irritated.

In some cases, your doctor may also have you apply another medication such a tretinoin (Retin-A) or Keralyt gel to the arms and backs of the hands before the evening application of 5-FU. This will decrease the number of weeks of therapy required.

What else should I know?

During therapy, sun sensitivity will be increased so sun exposure should be avoided. It is preferable to treat during the winter months if you need to be outdoors.

Take the pain mediation prescribed as needed.

If you wish to use makeup, apply the 5-FU first.