



# Skin Biopsy FAQs

## What is a skin biopsy?

A skin biopsy is a procedure that removes a small sample of skin for testing. The skin sample is sent away to a lab and looked at under a microscope to check for skin cancer, skin infections, or skin disorders such as lichen sclerosis.

There are three main ways to do a skin biopsy:

- A punch biopsy, which uses a special circular tool to remove the sample
- A scissor biopsy, which removes the sample with small scissors
- An excisional biopsy, which removes the sample with a small knife called a scalpel

The type of biopsy you get depends on the location and size of the abnormal area of skin, known as a skin lesion. Most skin biopsies can be done in a health care provider's office or other outpatient facility.

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## What is a skin biopsy used for?

A skin biopsy is used to help diagnose a variety of skin conditions including:

- Skin disorders such as lichen sclerosis, lichen planus, psoriasis, and eczema
- Bacterial or fungal infections of the skin
- Skin cancer — a biopsy can confirm or rule out whether a suspicious mole or other growth is cancerous

A skin biopsy can help diagnose skin cancer in the early stages, when it's easier to treat.

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## Why do I need a skin biopsy?

You may need a skin biopsy if you have certain skin symptoms such as:

- A persistent rash
  - Scaly or rough skin
  - Open sores
  - A mole or other growth that is irregular in shape, color, and/or size
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## What happens during a skin biopsy?

A health care provider will clean the site and inject an anesthetic so you won't feel any pain during the procedure. Often a local lidocaine cream is placed before the injection to minimize the discomfort of the needle. The rest of the procedure steps depend on which type of skin biopsy you are getting. There are three main types:

### Punch biopsy

- A health care provider will place a special circular tool over the abnormal skin area (lesion) and rotate it to remove a small piece of skin (about the size of a pencil eraser)
- The sample will be lifted out with a special tool
- If a larger skin sample was taken, you may need one or two stitches to cover the biopsy site
- Pressure or a medicine will be applied to the site until the bleeding stops
- The site will be covered with a dressing or a small amount of antibiotic ointment if it is in a location where a bandaid cannot be placed

### **Scissor biopsy**

- A health care provider will use a pair of scissors or a scalpel to remove a sample from the top layer of your skin
- Pressure will be applied to the biopsy site to stop the bleeding. You may also get a medicine that goes on top of the skin (also called a topical medicine) to help stop the bleeding

### **Excisional biopsy**

- A surgeon will use a scalpel to remove the entire skin lesion (the abnormal area of skin)
  - The surgeon will close the biopsy site with stitches
  - Pressure will be applied to the site until the bleeding stops
  - The site will be covered with a bandage or sterile dressing if possible or you will be given a pad to wear home if spotting or light bleeding is expected.
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## **Will I need to do anything to prepare for the biopsy?**

You don't need any special preparations for a skin biopsy.

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## **Are there any risks to the test?**

You may have a little bruising, bleeding, or soreness at the biopsy site. If these symptoms last longer than a few days or they get worse, talk to your health care provider.

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## **How will I get my results?**

Someone from the office will call you with the results unless it was decided at the time of the biopsy that you would return for a follow up visit to discuss results.

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## **What will happen after the biopsy?**

You may have some pain or discomfort at the biopsy site. Taking ibuprofen or acetaminophen should help.

You may have some mild to moderate itching and swelling or spotty bleeding at the site. This is part of the healing process and may last up to 1 week after the procedure.

After going to the bathroom, pour plain water over the site and then gently dab dry. Use a peri-bottle (any bottle you can fill with water and gently squirt with) or use a small, clean cup.

Sitz baths can be soothing. Sit in a tub or sitz bath (a plastic device that sits on the toilet and holds water for soaking) with plain, warm water for about 5-15 minutes up to 3 times a day. Best to not add anything to the water in the days following the biopsy.

You may want to use a cool compress on the skin yet do not apply ice directly on the skin. You may want to wear loose fitting clothes.

You can engage in sexual activity one week after the biopsy IF you think it will be comfortable to you. If you have stitches, your provider may ask you to wait to be seen prior to sexual activity.

Be kind to yourself and listen to your body. Everyone heals at their own pace.

