



What are seborrheic keratoses (SKs)? Seborrheic keratoses are common harmless lesions. They most frequently appear in middle aged persons, but may be found in adults of any age. They may be called “wisdom spots”, “people barnacles”, or “senile warts”.

SKs are generally round and brown in color, and they are commonly mistaken for moles or warts.

What causes SKs? SKs develop during adulthood and increase in number as we age. They are not due to a viral infection like a wart. They are not caused by sun exposure. The number of SKs we develop is largely determined by our family history of them.

Do SKs need to be removed? SKs are completely harmless and can never become cancerous. In general, removal is not medically necessary. On occasion, removal might be considered, for example, if a SK on the beard area is constantly being cut during shaving.

Removal of a SK is usually accomplished by freezing the lesion with liquid nitrogen. Liquid nitrogen is an extremely cold liquid which will destroy unwanted tissue. A blister or an extremely red spot will form around the SK after liquid nitrogen treatment. The SK will scab off in about 2 weeks following the treatment. It is not necessary to apply any medication to the treated area, and it is OK to shower or bathe as usual.

The majority of SKs do not cause symptoms and their removal is considered cosmetic and not covered under medical insurance. The cosmetic clinic run by Kaiser Permanente (408-851-8200) will be able to remove them for a modest fee if you desire.