Seborrheic keratosis (SK) is a common benign lesion, usually round or oval, ranging from light tan to dark brown. SK lesions affect 1 out of 5 Americans, particularly those older than 50 years. Clinicians must accurately diagnose SK lesions before removing them. SK lesions are benign and can be removed for cosmetic reasons if the patient desires; treatment may be indicated—and reimbursable—if the lesion is irritated. In the case of suspicious lesions, clinicians should perform a shave biopsy to ensure that they are not premalignant or malignant tumors. Choice of treatment is based on the number of lesions, location on the body, skin pigmentation, thickness of the lesion, and overall esthetic considerations. Cryosurgery is the method preferred by most physicians for removing these lesions; other methods include curettage, electrosurgery, lasers, and a combination of modalities. Emerging topical therapies may provide effective lesion removal without the adverse effects seen with cryotherapy, lasers, or other standard modalities. Some 83 million Americans—approximately 20% to 25% of the population—are affected by SK. These benign lesions are usually seen in people older than 50 years. SK lesions are equally distributed among men and women, although a recent survey of patients with SK found a slightly higher rate among men. Furthermore, SK is thought to be more prevalent in Caucasians, but a variant form known as dermatosis papulosa nigra can affect people with Fitzpatrick skin type VI. The presentation of SK lesions is highly variable, which has led to the use of several synonyms to identify the condition, including basal cell acanthoma, basal cell papilloma, benign acanthokeratoma, verruca seborrhoica (seborrheic wart), and verruca senilis (senile wart). A study of more than 4000 cases characterized the subtypes of SK lesions. The 5 patterns found most frequently were:

- Multicomponent (19.9%) lesions, which involve a combination of ≥3 distinct structures
- Reticular (14.9%) lesions which have a deep brown pigment with thin brown lines at the border, a pattern found in solar lentigo or Clark nevus

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<th>Table 1. Fitzpatrick Skin Phototypes</th>
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Figure. Types of Seborrheic Keratosis Lesions

- a. Multicomponent (≥3 distinctive structures)
- b. Reticular
- c. Bowenoid
- d. Hairpin
- e. Keratoacanthoma-like
- f. Blue-like
- g. Lichenoid
- h. Hyperkeratotic
- i. Clonal
- j. Spitzoid


Table 2. Differential Diagnoses of Seborrheic Keratosis

**Permanent or Malignant Lesions**

- Actinic keratosis
- Bowen disease (SCC in situ)
- Invasive SCC / SCC in situ
- Lentigo maligna
- Malignant melanoma
- Pigmented basal cells
- Verruca vulgaris (warts)

**Benign Lesions**

- Acrochordon (skin tags)
- Acrokeratosis verruiformis
- Benign lichenoid keratosis
- Condyloma acuminatum
- Eccrine poroma/hidroacanthoma simplex
- Melanocytic nevus
- Solar lentigo (liver spots)
- Tumor of the infundibulum

SCC = squamous cell carcinoma.
A Closer Look at Seborrheic Keratosis
Since its introduction in 1998, the dermatoscope has changed the landscape of dermatology. The device’s sensitivity is 95.7%, and its specificity is 78.3%. In a study of 134 cases of melanoma that resembled SK, dermoscopy demonstrated its efficacy in finding 82% of SK-like melanomas in patients initially misdiagnosed with SK. Among the findings was that a blue-black sign aided in the correct diagnosis of melanoma in distinguishing it from SK.

be helpful for ascertaining the correct diagnosis. Dermoscopy is >4 times more accurate than examination with the naked eye.9

Use of a dermatoscope, following proper training, reduces misdiagnoses and unnecessary biopsies. However, not all dermatology residents have access to adequate dermoscopy training.11 The triage amalgamated dermatoscopic algorithm (TADA) method—in which clinicians first decide whether a lesion could be malignant—was shown to significantly increase the number of correct diagnoses of benign lesions.12 The most important decision is to determine whether a lesion is benign or malignant; if it is the latter, the clinician should obtain a timely biopsy.12

If a misdiagnosis occurs, the delay in treatment, or the use of an inappropriate treatment, can mean the difference between life and death. In some cases, for example, a patient who has hidroacanthoma simplex (HAS; also known as intraepidermal eccrine poroma) may be misdiagnosed as SK. Inappropriately treating the HAS lesion with cryotherapy (liquid nitrogen) could trigger a rare but potentially fatal porocarcinoma.13

Indications for Biopsy
Most SK lesions can be readily diagnosed on visual and tactile examination, but if there is doubt—or it takes more than a minute to discern whether it is a seborrheic keratosis—consider a shave biopsy. Clinicians who are not dermatologists tend to perform excisional biopsies—involving a larger area of the skin—at a rate 5 times that of dermatologists. On average, dermatologists see more than 150 SK lesions per month, so they are well equipped to diagnose the lesions quickly and efficiently with the aid of a dermatoscope.2

To Treat or Not to Treat?
Understandably, patients’ concerns that their SK lesions might be malignant will often lead them to see their dermatologist. Many complain that the lesions—which are sometimes called “senile barnacles”—make them appear older.

In most cases, SK lesions do not require medical treatment. The decision to treat is based on several factors. SK should be treated if the lesion treatment is inflamed, irritated, itchy, or (rarely) painful due to friction (eg, from clothes, razors, or jewelry). In such cases, treatment should be covered by medical insurance. In a survey of 594 patients, 19% presented with SK lesions that were irritated. However, in 43% of the cases, patients requested the removal of unsightly SK lesions because they were located in cosmetically sensitive areas, such as the face and neck. As a rule, patients must cover the cost of such removal as an out-of-pocket expense.

Often, when patients hear that insurance will not reimburse for a cosmetic procedure, they may decide not to have the lesions removed. Of the patients who choose removal, most are women, and most of the lesions appear on the face. Clinicians should be prepared to counsel patients on their treatment options.

Treatment Options
How to remove an SK lesion depends largely on whether the clinician suspects a malignancy, which would need to be biopsied for further inspection. Other factors that guide the decision on which modalities to use are the location of the lesion(s) on the body, the patient’s pigmentation, and the thickness and size of the lesion. Lesions in cosmetically sensitive areas call for a conservative approach.

Cryosurgery
There are no guidelines or efficacy studies on the best way to remove SK lesions. Approximately two thirds of dermatologists prefer cryosurgery with liquid nitrogen, which can be performed in the office, generally without a topical anesthetic.14 Cryosurgery is thought to freeze the SK cells to a temperature of –20°C to –30°C (–4°F to –22°F) so that they dehydrate and eventually slough off. There are no standards for the duration of cryosurgery applications, whether directly or with a cotton swab. The American Academy of Dermatology recommends that any clinician using this technique be properly trained.1

Each lesion has a variable treatment course. A typical, flat SK lesion may need only a single application of 5 to 10 seconds of liquid nitrogen, whereas a larger, thicker lesion may require several freeze/thaw cycles and multiple office visits.1

The benefits of cryosurgery include low infection risk, ease of application, and minimal scarring. Should the area ulcerate, proper healing can be promoted by keeping the treatment area clean, moist (with an ointment such as petrolatum), and covered.1 Cryosurgery lesions take approximately 7 to 10 days to heal, but the SK lesion itself may not slough off for a few weeks, depending on the thickness. In a study of 80 patients, most preferred cryosurgery because the wound care was not as extensive as it was for curettage or excision.1

Potential disadvantages of cryosurgery include edema, erythema, scarring, and hypopigmentation, particularly in sensitive areas. Some clinicians may be too aggressive when using this approach for treatment. A few patients might find cryosurgery too painful; in others, erythema and swelling might persist for a few weeks. Relative contraindications for cryosurgery include lesions near the eyes and in patients subject to postinflammatory hyperpigmentation. Avoid freezing suspicious lesions requiring biopsy such as melanoma, basal cell carcinoma, or squamous cell carcinoma.1

Curettage
Curettage of SKs can be performed efficiently without anesthesia, although many patients find this approach unacceptable. Use of anesthesia usually keeps the patient comfortable during the procedure. The benefit of curettage is that patients leave the clinic free of the treated lesions. However, there is usually some bleeding, and complete healing takes 5 to 7 days. Curettage can be used as a stand-alone method or it can be combined with cryosurgery for treating deeper lesions. It can be more time-consuming than cryosurgery and does require the use of a curette, but generally the wounds heal without scarring. Curettage is the preferred approach of many dermatologists, including the authors of this article.

Shave or Surgical Excision
In the case of a potentially malignant lesion, shave removal and biopsy of the SK lesion will preserve the tissue for further histopathologic inspection. Surgical excision of an obvious SK lesion is generally unnecessary and should be avoided. Treatment depends on the thickness and location of the lesion and whether multiple lesions are present.1

Electrosurgery
Coagulation of SKs by electrosiccation or electrocautery involves destruction of small lesions by cold point diathermy or heat, respectively. Electrosiccation requires contact of an RF electrode with the skin, whereas electrofulguration destroys superficial lesions by “sparking” the affected area. Electrocautery uses a red-hot filament. Electrosurgery is often the preferred method for removing dermatosis papulosa nigra lesions, especially when the patient is concerned about pigment changes. However, there are numerous ways of treating this condition, including the use of lasers.
Lasers
Both ablative (eg, CO₂ and erbium-YAG) and nonablative (eg, 755-nm alexandrite and 532-nm diode) lasers have been used to remove SK lesions with varying results. Much depends on the training and comfort level of the clinician. As is true of cryosurgery, in the absence of guidelines, the clinician’s experience determines the intensity and duration of laser treatment. Noninvasive treatment using intense pulsed light (IPL) to treat SK lesions has been tested in 10 case studies (mean age, 61.7 years) with positive results, albeit with small, superficial lesions. The lesions “disappeared” (became depigmented) in an average of 2 treatments within 30 days without scarring or erythema. Researchers caution that results can vary according to the clinician’s experience with IPL.

Topical Agents on the Horizon
The need exists for an effective noninvasive treatment to remove SK lesions. There are currently no topical treatments approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for SK. However, several such therapies are in development.

Preliminary evidence shows promise for an agent in development, a high-concentration hydrogen peroxide topical known as A-101 40% solution (A-101), which must be applied by a healthcare provider as an in-office procedure. In 2 pivotal phase 3 trials (N=937), 51.3% of SK lesions treated with A-101 were assessed as clear or near clear compared with 7.3% in the placebo group. For facial lesions, A-101 cleared 65.3% of SK lesions vs 10.5% for placebo. Local skin reactions, such as hypopigmentation, hyperpigmentation, and scarring, were graded as mild. An open-label study evaluating safety in 147 patients has been submitted. A new drug application for A-101 has been submitted to the FDA for review; a decision is expected by the end of 2017.

Another topical formulation being investigated is potassium dobesilate 5% cream, which inhibits the skin’s FGFR3 activity to halt SK lesion formation. In a case report, topical dobesilate demonstrated efficacy for facial SK with a 6-month patient application, even at the 1-year follow-up. Adverse events, such as application-site reactions, skin atrophy, dyspigmentation, or skin thinning, were not reported in this case study. Topical dobesilate may provide another modality for SK lesion removal in cosmetically sensitive areas.

The nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac gel 3% showed promise in a case study of a 73-year-old man with an SK lesion on his nose in which the gel applied twice daily dissolved the lesion within 30 days. Though diclofenac gel is FDA-approved for clearing actinic keratoses, it may provide another (off-label) option for those whose SK lesions are in cosmetically sensitive areas.

In addition, BL-5010, a combination of aqueous trichloroacetic acid and formalin acid, is a topical formulation applied with a pen device to target SK lesions. In phase 1/2 trials with 60 patients, 1 application of the formulation eradicated 96.7% of the lesions in 2 weeks.

In an open-label study of 15 patients with SK, tazarotene 0.1% cream applied twice daily disintegrated the lesions within 16 weeks. Twice-daily tazarotene 0.1% cream was preferred by patients and was more effective than daily applications of its comparators, calcipotriene 0.005% ointment and imiquimod 5% cream, which did not yield any clinical improvement.

Topical and systemic vitamin D have been studied as options for eradicating SK, but neither strategy has had much success. In a study of 116 cases, topical vitamin D eliminated >80% of the SK lesions in 30.2% of patients. However, SK lesions tended to recur after the use of either formulation of vitamin D.

Preliminary in vitro trials have provided evidence for 2 investigational topicals that rely on Akt inhibition, A-443654 and GSK690693. In these trials, lesions exposed to A-443654 completely disappeared.

The emergence of novel noninvasive and topical formulations will provide patients and clinicians with more cosmetically elegant solutions for destroying SK lesions without scarring, dyspigmentation, or infection.

Summary
SK is a common dermatologic condition, particularly in persons older than 50 years. It is incumbent upon clinicians to accurately diagnose SK lesions before removing them. These SK lesions are usually benign and can be removed for cosmetic reasons if the patient desires; treatment may be indicated (and may be reimbursable) if the lesion is irritated. In the case of suspicious lesions, clinicians should perform a shave biopsy to ensure that the lesions are not premalignant or malignant, such as melanoma. Choice of treatment is based mainly on the number of lesions, location on the body, skin pigmentation, thickness of the lesion, and patient esthetics. Emerging topical therapies may be found to offer effective lesion removal without the use of cryotherapy, lasers, or other standard modalities.

References