

**MY OPERATION**

# My dry skin was cancer

Gill Lee, 38, from Liverpool, risked permanent disfigurement by ignoring a niggling skin problem

**F**our years ago, I noticed a patch of dry, itchy skin on the lower part of my right eye. But because it was so easily disguised with make-up, I didn't let it bother me.

It wasn't until a year later, when I was working as a model on a photo shoot and the make-up artist said she thought the skin round my eye looked worrying, that I finally decided to get it checked out by my doctor.

Having examined the mark, he referred me to Broadgreen Hospital, Liverpool, for a biopsy. This involved removing a small patch of skin to be tested in the laboratory for cancerous cells. I had to wait a week for the results, and then I got the devastating news that it was a form of skin cancer called basal cell carcinoma (BCC).

I panicked, but the doctor explained that BCCs are one of the least harmful types of skin cancers, as they don't spread elsewhere and are rarely life-threatening. He said that it had probably been caused by the sunbeds I'd

used in my twenties. I felt so stupid for having risked my health for vanity and, even worse, for having ignored the signs for a year.

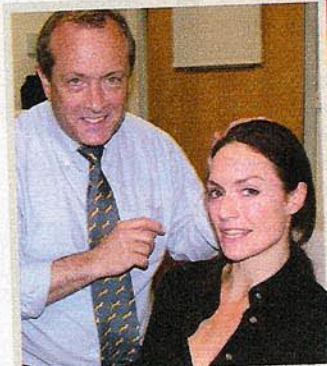
I was told that the carcinoma needed to be removed to prevent it from growing, and I was referred to an eye specialist at Warrington Hospital in Cheshire, in April 2004. Unfortunately, the specialist couldn't give me any idea how much skin he'd need to remove, and I was petrified I was going to be left permanently disfigured.

To make matters worse, when I woke up from the operation, the surgeon told me that the carcinoma had been much deeper than he'd originally thought.

I wasn't able to remove the bandages on



Gill, who's a model, was saved from disfigurement; and, inset, with Dr Colin Hooper, a PDT expert



my face for five days. Although I was relieved the carcinoma had gone, I was scared that my looks had been ruined. But when the bandages came off and my partner, Peter, confirmed that I didn't look any different, I burst into tears with relief.

Unfortunately, a year later the carcinoma returned, but I was able to be treated with photodynamic therapy (PDT), which uses light therapy and light-sensitive drugs to destroy the cancer cells without surgery.

I'm so grateful I decided to see a GP before the carcinoma got bigger and I risked losing my eye. Nowadays, I'm careful whenever I'm in the sun, and I wouldn't dream of using a sunbed again.

**'I'm never going to use a sunbed again'**

## BASAL CELL CARCINOMA

**WHAT IS IT?** An abnormal growth in the basal cells, which form the deepest layer of the skin. If left untreated, it invades and destroys surrounding tissue, such as the eye, but rarely spreads to other parts of the body. BCC is caused by ultraviolet radiation from sunlight or sunbeds.

**WARNING SIGNS** See your doctor if you have a persistent, non-healing sore; a reddish patch or

irritated area; a shiny bump; a pink growth; a scar-like area that is white, yellow or waxy; or eczema-like skin.

**HOW IS IT TREATED?** With surgery or radiotherapy. The best treatment is prevention using sunscreens. For more information, contact Cancer Research UK (0800 226 237; [www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart)), or The MOLE Clinic (020 7734 1177; [www.scansol.com](http://www.scansol.com)).



Basal cell carcinomas can appear as flat nodules that eventually break down at the centre to form an ulcer