

# Men's Health

## When Skin Cancer Attacks Your Face

Use this advice to put yourself on the fast track to recovery

By [Adam Campbell](#), May 05, 2011



Let's assume you've just been diagnosed with skin cancer—on your face. Your first reaction is likely to be, “Get this cancer off me . . . yesterday!” So you make the first available appointment with the most convenient surgeon.

But as someone who has been through this experience, allow me to make a suggestion: At least *try* to find the best surgeon you can. After all, what's the downside? For me, the cost was exactly the same: a \$40 co-pay. And besides, we're talking about your face. So go ahead and schedule the first available appointment with the most convenient surgeon. Then look for a second option.

Your best approach: “Seek out a Mohs Surgeon,” says [Dr. Christopher Miller](#), director of dermatologic surgery at the University of Pennsylvania—and the man who has removed basal cell carcinoma from my nose and squamous cell carcinoma from my upper lip.

“Mohs surgeons are highly-trained to perform surgery that has a high cure rate, but that also spares tissue for a better cosmetic outcome.”

My personal story: I was originally diagnosed with skin cancer by a dermatologist in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where I live. He suggested Mohs surgery, but told me that he wasn't trained for the procedure. So he referred me to a surgeon in his office. But then I asked him one last, very important question. In fact, it's the same question you should ask.

“What Mohs surgeon would you want to treat *your* skin cancer?”

Without a pause, my dermatologist replied: “Christopher Miller at the University of Pennsylvania.”

Keep in mind, the Allentown surgeon was just 10 minutes from my home; Dr. Miller's office was an hour and 15 minutes away—and that's without factoring in Philly traffic.

Sure, I had to drive down for a consult, the surgeries, and follow-up appointments. But here's what I can tell you: It's the most worthwhile mileage I've ever put on my car. And were I to move another 2 hours away, I'd still make the trip as many times as needed. That's how happy I am with the outcome of my surgery. (To see my results, read "[Will I Look Like a Monster](#)", which includes video of my surgery.)

So how do *you* find a great surgeon? A good place to start your search is at an academic research hospital. These are institutions—like the University of Pennsylvania—where the doctors conduct clinical trials, publish scientific papers, and often have cutting-edge resources and facilities.

A word of caution, though: You don't just want your surgeon to be published; you want him or her to be highly experienced. As Dr. Miller puts it: "Surgery is like a sport; it requires a lot of practice for high performance."

I asked Dr. Miller how he would conduct a search for a Mohs surgeon. Here's his advice, in his words:

**1. Be absolutely sure your Mohs surgeon has completed a fellowship in Mohs surgery.** This is at least a 1-year fellowship with intensive training in skin cancer biology, pathology, Mohs technique, and reconstructive surgery. The fellowship guarantees that the surgeon will have had a minimum of at least 500 cases before graduation. Some doctors will perform Mohs surgery after just a weeklong course. Yes, this is crazy, but it happens. And it's even common in areas like Florida and California. Also, your surgeon should be a member of the [American College of Mohs Surgeons](#). (Note: You can't be a member without completing a fellowship.) You can find a list of surgeons at the organization's web site.

**2. Ask around.** Not all surgeons are created equal. Some Mohs surgeons or plastic surgeons are really good. Some are not so good. Just like in any profession, there is variation in skills among surgeons. Therefore, try to get a recommendation from a trusted doctor or friend who has experience with the surgeon, and has seen their results first hand.

**3. Meet the surgeon prior to the surgery.** (Especially if you aren't able to attain a recommendation from a trusted source.) You should feel free to ask the surgeon to show you photos of outcomes for surgeries with similar defects to yours. You should also ask how many cases the surgeon has performed. While a high number of cases doesn't guarantee quality, a patient should be highly suspicious of a Mohs surgeon performing fewer than 500 cases per year. This means Mohs is not a main focus of their practice. (*Editor's note: Dr. Miller estimates that he's performed more than 6,000 Mohs surgeries in the last six to seven years.*)

The take-home message: Allowing another human being to take a scalpel to your face is a big deal. You want to have tremendous confidence in your surgeon. So make the effort to find the doctor that's right for you.