



## SKIN CANCER BASICS

There are three types of skin cancer most frequently found in fair skinned individuals. These include **basal cell carcinomas** (the most common), **squamous cell carcinomas** and **malignant melanoma** (least common).

The sun is the leading cause of these skin cancers. The damage caused by chronic exposure and repeated sunburn as a child persists long after the burn and tan have faded. Years later, after repeated small doses of sunshine (driving in the car, golfing, etc.) these cancers may sprout like weeds in a lawn.

**Basal cell carcinoma** is the most common skin cancer seen in practice. It is highly correlated with the amount of sun exposure and often begins as a tiny pearly pink bump. It is persistent, grows slowly and may eventually bleed and break down. It may also appear as a scaly red patch. Men often complain of a bump that is repeatedly nicked while shaving. Fortunately these cancers are cured by destruction or removal.

**Squamous cell carcinoma** is fairly common and also arises in areas repeatedly exposed to the sun (ears, face, neck, back of hands). They may arise as tender skin colored bumps or thick crusted areas that will not heal. Some may resemble and be misdiagnosed as dermatitis, eczema, or “ring worm”. Squamous cell skin cancer is often curable by destruction or removal. However, in the later stages they have the potential of invading the blood stream and metastasizing.

**Actinic keratoses (AKs)** are also referred to as “solar keratoses” and are considered the earliest stage in the development of skin cancer (squamous cell carcinoma). AKs are found on chronically sun-exposed skin. They are commonly found on the temples, forehead, ears, the scalp of bald men, and the backs of the hands. They are described as a dry, scaly, and rough skin-colored to reddish-brown “bump”. Basic types of treatment include liquid nitrogen (cryosurgery) or topical anti-cancer or “chemo-creams” which are applied to the skin to treat numerous diffused AKs.

**Malignant melanoma** is being diagnosed more and more frequently. Rates are approaching 1 in 64 for Caucasians. This is an aggressive skin cancer that grows more quickly than either the basal cell or squamous cell carcinoma. It is classically described as a mole that begins to change shape, color and size or a new dark colored spot that suddenly appears. They may be flat or raised and can be a variety of shades of brown and/or pink. It is most important that these are removed as early as possible to ensure a cure.

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