

# WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON CANCER?

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What is the most common type of cancer in the United States? Is it lung, breast, prostate? If you answered yes to any of these, you are off by a long shot. And, as we approach the summer months, the Physicians of the Florida Wellcare Alliance want you to protect yourself from this common malignancy.

Skin cancers are by far the most commonly diagnosed cancers in the United States, with over one million cases diagnosed each year. Most cases of skin cancer are either what we call basal cell cancers, or squamous cell cancers. Generally speaking, these cancers grow slowly, and do not usually spread unless they are neglected and allowed to grow for quite some time. With surgery or radiation, the cure rate of these cancers is extremely high.

Melanoma, the other main type of skin cancer, makes up only about ten percent of skin cancer cases. In contrast, however, it accounts for more than 75% of all skin cancer deaths. When caught early, it can be treated effectively, but if it is allowed to grow and spread, it can be very difficult to treat.

It has been known for some time that excess sun exposure is a very important risk factor when looking at skin cancers. The ultraviolet rays emitted by the sun cause damage to the cells' genetic DNA, and this can increase the risk of cancer. People who spend an awful lot of time out in the sun are more likely to develop squamous cell or basal cell cancers than those who do not spend time in the sun. Children who experience severe sunburns are also known to be at a higher risk for melanoma.

Another strong factor in the risk of skin cancer is skin tone. Having lighter skin has been associated with a higher risk of skin cancer in many studies. African Americans are much less likely than whites to develop a skin cancer, although the risk for African Americans is not zero. African Americans have more of the skin pigment melanin in their skin, which seems to provide some protection against the ultraviolet rays of the sun.

As we enter the summer months, it is important for everyone to realize that anyone can get a skin cancer. No one is without risk, which is why being aware of sun safety is so important for everyone. The best way to lower your risk of skin cancer is to limit your exposure to the sun through the protection of sunscreens, hats, sunglasses, clothing and shade. Avoid exposure to the sun between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM, which is the peak time for ultraviolet exposure, and always utilize sunscreen products when you expect to be outdoors for any length of time.

May 2003