More than 3.5 million new skin cancers are diagnosed every year, and they are almost always completely curable if caught early enough.

There are three major forms of skin cancer — basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma — plus the most common precancer, actinic keratosis. The photographs in this handout show typical examples of each, but keep in mind that many cancers don’t look like these. That’s why you should see your doctor right away if you notice any suspicious moles or spots anywhere on your body.

What Is Skin Cancer?
Skin cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal skin cells. It occurs when unrepaired damage to skin cells (most often caused by ultraviolet radiation from the sun) triggers genetic defects that lead to the formation of malignant tumors.

Your Smartest Move: PREVENTION
While skin cancers — even melanomas — can almost always be cured if found and treated early, you can avoid getting them in the first place. Here are some sun safety practices that really work:

Seek the shade, especially between 10 AM and 4 PM.

Do not burn.

Avoid tanning & UV tanning beds.

Cover up with clothing, including a broad-brimmed hat and UV-blocking sunglasses.

Use a broad spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher every day. For extended outdoor activity, use a water-resistant, broad spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.

Apply 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) of sunscreen to your entire body 30 minutes before going outside. Reapply every two hours or after swimming or excessive sweating.

Keep newborns out of the sun.

Examine your skin head-to-toe every month.

See your doctor every year for a professional skin exam.

SPOTLIGHT ON SKIN CANCER
What You Need to Know, What You Need to Look For

DID YOU KNOW?

One in five Americans will develop skin cancer over the course of a lifetime.

99%
The survival rate for patients whose melanoma is detected early is about 99%. The survival rate falls to 15% for those with advanced disease.

About 90% of nonmelanoma skin cancers are associated with exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun.
Actinic Keratoses (AKs)
Also known as solar keratoses, these precancers are caused by the sun and usually appear as small, crusty or scaly bumps. They may be elevated, rough in texture, and resemble warts. Most are red, but they can also be tan, pink, and/or flesh-toned. While most are benign, some can develop into invasive squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) if left untreated.

Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCCs)
The most common cancers in the world often have a raised, translucent, pearly nodule that may ulcerate (have broken skin) and bleed. They can also appear as open sores, red patches, pink growths, shiny bumps, or scars. They are usually caused by both cumulative and intermittent sun exposure or tanning machine exposure.

Squamous Cell Carcinomas (SCCs)
The second most common skin cancers are usually raised, and look like scaly red patches, opaque pink nodules, open sores, elevated growths with a central depression, or warts. They may be ulcerated in the center. Long-term, cumulative sun exposure is the most common cause. A small percentage of SCCs spread to other parts of the body and can become deadly.

Melanoma
The most dangerous skin cancer, it can be life-threatening if allowed to advance. Usually brown-black or multicolored plaques (raised patches) or nodules with irregular outlines, they may crust or bleed. Look for the warning ABCDE signs: Asymmetry, Border irregularity, Color variation, Diameter (usually over 1/4 inch), and Evolving or changing.