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TROPICAL LIFE

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Detecting cancer

You've recently noticed an ugly spot. Could it be serious or just a zit?

Knowing what various skin cancers look like could save your life, says Dr. Mark Nestor, clinical associate professor of dermatology at University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, and spokesman for the Skin Cancer Foundation.

Here's a quick guide to the three types of skin cancer:

- **Basal cell** -- The most easily treated and common (about 800,000 Americans will get it this year), it's rarely fatal. Spots often appear pink and pearly; sometimes they are existing moles that have taken a cancerous turn after repeated sun exposure.
- **Squamous cell** -- The second most common -- about 200,000 Americans are diagnosed each year. Marks are often rough, red or scaly. They can ulcerate and become large, deep lesions; bleed when irritated; and metastasize into other organs. The good news: They're virtually 100 percent curable if caught early, Nestor says.
- **Melanoma** -- The deadliest of the three, with about 60,000 new cases each year and 8,100 deaths. Look out for a growth that changes in color, texture and size, or an open sore that won't heal. Their appearance runs the gamut -- from translucent, tan, red and brown to black. Florida will have 4,380 new cases of melanoma in 2007, second only to California, with 6,680.

Note: Fairer skin is more susceptible to cancer. To be safe, go to your dermatologist for routine skin checks, regardless of skin type. For more info and tips, go to www.skincancer.org.