

■ ISSUES

New research confirms increased risk of melanoma associated with tanning beds

By Stefanie Wallace

All they want is a "healthy glow" for prom or a "base tan" to prevent burning while vacationing on a Caribbean island.

"I feel awesome about myself when I have a tan," said Andrea Personnic, a 22-year-old from Hamilton, Ont., who first started using tanning beds at the age of 17. "I am really pale; I feel like I look sick if I don't have one."

It's a common sentiment. Many young women feel more attractive and desirable with a tan. But what they may be doing is killing themselves one ultraviolet ray at a time.

In July, the [International Agency for Research on Cancer](#) released a new [report](#) confirming that ultraviolet rays are carcinogenic to humans and people who use tanning beds before the age of 30 increase their chances of developing melanoma by 75 percent.

"Even though I know there is a good chance of getting skin cancer, I still do it."

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, melanoma is the second most common form of cancer in people aged 15-29. But only one province has stepped up to do anything to prevent youths from overexposing themselves to dangerous UVA and UVB rays from a tanning bed. Currently, New Brunswick is the only province that bans anyone under the age of 18 from using a tanning bed. A bill sponsored by Liberal MPP Khalil Ramal, of the London-Fanshawe riding, to ban Ontario teenagers from using tanning beds made it to the committee stage in June 2008 – and that's the closest Ontario has gotten to regulating sunless tanning.

"UV lights do cause skin cancer, and they cause the most damage at an early age," said [Dr. Peter Vignjevic](#), a dermatologist from Hamilton.

"As a dermatologist, I feel it's particularly important that young people do not use tanning beds," he added. "The younger you are, the greater the risk you have later in life. A 15-year-old will notice the effects of tanning beds by the age of 30."

Although publicity about the risks of tanning is widespread, young people are still torn.

"I've never used a tanning bed," said 23-year-old Ashley Sutor of Fisherville, Ont. "I never thought it was necessary to use one. I might consider it if I wanted a base tan before going away somewhere, but I would still try to avoid using it."

Personnic tans on a regular basis and uses her salon's tanning lotion, but has burnt two or three times. "Even though I know there is a good chance of getting skin cancer, I still do it," she said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. PETER VIGNJEVIC

Any mole that is asymmetrical, more than one colour, has a fuzzy border or is bigger than 6mm wide could be cancerous and should be looked at by a doctor.

MORE INFORMATION

[Canadian Cancer Society](#)

The official website of the Canadian Cancer Society.

[The Indoor Tanning Association](#)

The ITA's website; promoting responsible sun care and sun burn prevention.

Practice safe sun

Dr. Vignjevic offers some tips on preventing overexposure to harmful UV rays.

- Wear sunscreen on a daily basis. It's as easy (for women, anyway) as wearing makeup with SPF 15 in it.
- Wear long sleeves and pants, and a wide brimmed hat that covers the neck and ears
- Lather up. Use a sunscreen with at least SPF 30, if not higher. "I usually recommend SPF 60, and reapply every hour, especially if you're sweating or in water."
- Avoid being outdoors between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., when the sun is strongest.

If you have a mole that you think might be cancerous, watch for any of these signs:

- Asymmetrical in shape
- Irregular or fuzzy border
- More than one colour
- Greater than 6mm in diameter (approximately the size of a pencil eraser)
- Any changes in one of the characteristics listed above

Industry reaction

The Indoor Tanning Association (ITA) released a [document](#) in July to counter media accusations that categorize tanning beds as a group one carcinogen, comparing them to arsenic.

"Because tanning beds produce the same UV light as the sun, overexposure and abuse of our product—just like overexposure to sunlight—is associated with an increased risk for some types of skin cancer," said the president of the ITA, Dan Humiston.

On its website, the ITA lists benefits of indoor tanning, including "minimizing the risk of a sunburn while maximizing the enjoyment and benefit of having a tan," and "exposure to UV light helps the body produce the activated form of vitamin D."

Dr. Vignjevic stresses that while some tanning salons will market sunless tanning as safe, it's really not.

"UV lights from tanning bed penetrate deeper into skin causing more potential for sun damage like wrinkling and freckling," he said. "As far as vitamin D is concerned, people who aren't getting natural sunlight can supplement it with 1000 international units of vitamin D in a pill form."

"Tanning salons should at least require parental consent," Dr. Vignjevic added. "In a perfect world, I'd like to see them totally outlawed, but I highly doubt that would happen."

Still, the invincibility principle remains among young people.

"Skin cancer scares me only when I hear about it. I don't think about it on a regular basis," Sutor said.

Personnic agrees.

"I always think it won't happen to me."

Twelve area tanning salons were contacted but representatives would not comment.

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