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No Such Thing as a ‘Healthy Tan’

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We’re a nation of sun worshippers. We escape long winters on Caribbean cruises, holidays in Mexico or trips to Florida. In summer we cook out, lounge on the deck and gravitate to lakes and shorelines to swim, boat or just laze in the sun. And, as if all of that fun in the sun isn’t enough, many of us prepare for it with visits to a tanning booth... so that even in the dead of winter we can maintain the illusion of a “healthy tan.”

In reality, tanning is anything but healthy. Any amount of tanning is a sign of skin damage at the cellular level.

Both sun tanning and indoor tanning accelerate the rate at which skin ages and becomes wrinkled while increasing the risk of any of the most common skin cancers, including the deadliest, melanoma.

The rise in the number of new skin cancers has been particularly marked in young people. Two decades ago, skin cancer in teens and young adults was considered rare. In the past decade the incidence of skin cancer among women aged 15 to 34 has increased by 20 percent.

Scientists believe teens are especially vulnerable to damage from ultraviolet rays. Still maturing skin cells and a developing immune system lower natural defenses at a time when adolescents are putting themselves at the greatest risk.

One study found that four of every five Americans under age 25 believed they look better with a tan. A similar number, four of five, say they tan and get sunburned during the summer.

Young women heavily frequent tanning booths. Recognizing the danger they pose to young skin, many states control access of younger teens. Some states even restrict the access of minors; others require a letter signed by a parent for teens under a certain age.

Scientists once thought that only ultraviolet B rays, the burning rays, were responsible for skin cancer. They now know that both ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B can cause skin damage that in some cases can lead to skin cancer.

UVA rays, which can pass through cloud cover or even car windows, penetrate to deeper skin layers

where they cause wrinkling, brown spots and, it's now believed, damage to DNA in skin cells.

The increase in both melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers seen in recent years is believed to be partly due to changes in the environment. The depletion of the earth's protective ozone layer allows higher levels of UV radiation to penetrate the atmosphere.

Data from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration indicates that the ozone layer is thinning at a rate of four to six percent per year. At some points on the globe, there are giant holes in the ozone layer. One hole stretches from Antarctica to southern Australia, for example, putting residents of many of that continent's cities and towns at high risk of skin damage.

Australia has a laid back, beach-going lifestyle - yet awareness of the danger of UV radiation is high. Weather forecasters give daily UV ratings and many residents even seek to protect their pets from excess UV exposure.

It's not just direct sun that causes damage to skin. Up to 80 percent of the sun's radiation can still penetrate cloud layers. And don't think you're safe when you're submerged; UV rays can also pass through water. The solution is to use sunscreen and protective clothing even on cloudy days and to use a waterproof sunscreen if you're in the water.

For teens and young adults who want to get a tanned look in the middle of winter or for a special occasion such as the prom, sunless tanning products now on the market can give a realistic tan with a simple application.

The products, which are approved by the Food and Drug Administration, use the chemical dihydroxyacetone, which reacts with the skin and is not harmful. Because the chemical, which is sprayed or rubbed on, affects the outer layer of dead skin cells, the tan lasts only for about three days until the skin cells are sloughed off.

Tests by staffers at Consumer Reports concluded that a number of products gave good realistic tans. It's important for anyone using these products to understand, however, that they don't protect against sunburn and sun damage.

Skin is a precious commodity. Treat it well, and it will help you maintain good health and present your best possible face to the world. Abuse it—at the beach or in a tanning salon—and you may be repaid with prematurely wrinkled and aged skin as well as an increased risk of developing skin cancer.

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