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FDA proposes changes for sunscreen products, while state's physicians debate restrictions on indoor tanning

INDIANAPOLIS (Sept. 19, 2007) How much do you know about sunlight? Chances are you don't know the light we get from the sun comes in two forms, one we see as light and one we cannot see called ultraviolet (UV) light. UV light comes in two forms also, UV-A rays that make us tan and UV-B rays that make us burn.

Until now, you could select a sun block with up to 30 levels of a sunburn protection factor or SPF for screening UV-B rays. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) now plans to introduce a rating system for UV-A protection, using one to four stars. One star would mean a product has the lowest level of UV-A protection; four stars would indicate the highest level.

The same FDA proposal includes the addition of warnings to increase awareness that sunscreens represent just one step in a process to avoid over-exposure to the sun. Limiting your time in the sun and wearing proper protection are also key preventive factors. The FDA will accept comments about its proposal through most of November; find details at www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2007/NEW01687.html.

The new protection levels are important because that healthy tan you think you get from UV-A rays actually represents sun-damaged skin. UV-A increases skin cancer risk and causes premature wrinkling, just like UV-B rays. And if you think gradual tanning using a tanning bed or light offers protection, you should know such lights simply act as

a “radiation multiplier,” further increasing skin cancer risk, according to the American Cancer Society.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared ultraviolet radiation from both the sun and artificial sources a “known carcinogen.”

So, tanning safely doesn’t happen by moving indoors to a tanning booth, which many Hoosiers do when autumn arrives. Indiana physicians, like those around the world, are raising alarms about increased exposure to ultraviolet light from tanning beds and the risks they pose for skin cancer.

“Indoor tanning lamps emit ultraviolet light at levels far greater than the sun,” said Deborah J. Armstrong, M.D., Ph.D., with Franklin Dermatology in Johnson County. The American Academy of Dermatology opposes indoor tanning for everyone and supports a ban on the production and sale of indoor tanning equipment for non-medical purposes.

“In 27 states, including Indiana, there are laws addressing age restrictions for tanning bed use,” explained Dr. Armstrong. In our state, parents must sign a risk waiver for minors ages 16 to 18, but the Franklin dermatologist believes that is not enough.

To protect Hoosiers, especially teenagers, Dr. Armstrong submitted a resolution for the Indiana State Medical Association (ISMA) annual convention to be held Sept. 28-30 in Indianapolis. Resolution 07-37, to be debated by the ISMA’s policy-making House of Delegates, asks the organization’s 8,400 physicians to seek restrictions:

- Prohibiting minors from using tanning devices
- Requiring the posting of the surgeon general’s warning on all tanning devices
- Prohibiting a person or facility from advertising use of any UV-A or UV-B tanning device using words like “safe,” “safe tanning,” “no harmful rays,” “no adverse effect” or similar wording

For more information from the ISMA about tanning beds and skin cancer, visit www.ismanet.org/pdf/healthful_hints/tanning.pdf.

The ISMA has existed since 1849 to promote health care policy in the public, private and governmental sectors and to support continuing medical education for the state’s physicians.

Editor's note: For more on the ISMA convention, go to www.ismanet.org/news/convention/conv_media_center.htm.

FAST FACTS

Dangerous melanoma, a form of skin cancer

62,000 U.S. cases this year

8,000 deaths in U.S. this year

Source: American Cancer Society

Tanning salons

1 million people use them each day

70% of the users are female

25% of teenage girls have used them

3 or more times

Source: American Academy of Dermatology