

Tanning beds increase risk of skin cancer

Tanning salons are big business these days. In fact, an estimated one million Americans a day visit over 18,000 of these establishments as they try to get a “healthy” tan. Unfortunately, there is nothing healthy about a dark tan. It’s actually a sign the skin has been damaged and continual tanning, especially in tanning beds, can develop melanoma – the most dangerous type of skin cancer.

Even though many tanning salons promote tanning beds as “safe,” truth is the lamps release at least twice the amount of UVA rays as the sun. This means a 15–30 minute session under a tanning light equals an entire day in the sun and a great deal of damage to the skin.



A study by the Department of Dermatology at Johns Hopkins University confirmed the danger of tanning beds. It concluded that even short-term tanning in salons was just as harmful as the sun’s rays and caused enough damage to trigger skin cancer.

Physicians are already seeing the effects tanning salons and overall sun exposure has on American’s health. In fact, the American Academy of Dermatology estimates that over 7,000 people will die of skin cancer while more than one million people will be diagnosed with it this year alone.

The increase in melanoma cases has dermatologists concerned. Some describe it as an epidemic. “No doubt we are seeing more melanoma in younger patients than we used to,” said Peter Winters, M.D., an Indianapolis dermatologist and past president of the Indiana State Medical Association. “But we are also catching it earlier, too.”

What is skin cancer?

According to the National Cancer Institute, skin cancer is actually a disease of the body’s cells. Cells help tissue to grow, divide and replace themselves. However, tumors develop when cells divide and grow rapidly producing too much tissue. Overexposure to UV rays over a period of time, either from the sun or tanning beds, damages the body’s cells.

There are two different kinds of tumors: benign and malignant. Benign tumors are not cancerous and cannot spread to other parts of the body. They can be surgically removed and usually do not return.

Malignant tumors are cancerous and destroy healthy tissue. What’s more, the cancer cells spread forming new tumors to internal organs.

A good indication of skin cancer is revealed in changes in freckles or moles, a new growth or a small red patch that never heals. Always check with a dermatologist if a mole or spot is asymmetrical, has irregular or uneven borders, a variation in color and is larger than the size of a pencil eraser.

Sadly, melanoma is the most common cancer in young women ages 25-29.

Who is at risk?

Certain people are more at risk for skin cancer than others. They include:

- People with white skin that burns easily to moderately and may gradually tan to light brown
- People who have had excessive exposure to UV radiation without protection
- People with a family history of skin cancer

Prevention

You can avoid skin cancer by following these simple steps:

- Do not use tanning beds
- Stay out of the sun when its rays are the strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Use sunscreen with a sun protective factor (SPF) of 15 or more when going outdoors.
- Wear hats, sunglasses and other articles of clothing that cover most of the body

See a dermatologist if you think you have damaged skin. A dermatologist is a medical doctor trained to detect early signs of skin cancer who can examine all areas of the skin looking at moles and any scaly red patches.

Physicians also encourage patients to do a regular self-exam. Look for a change in size, texture or color of birthmarks, moles or blemishes. Check the front and back of your body in the mirror along with the arms, elbows, legs and feet including the soles of the feet.

Physician members of the Indiana State Medical Association consider the ultraviolet light in tanning beds dangerous and support appropriate regulatory and oversight activity governing tanning salons for the protection of patients.

For more information on the dangers of tanning beds and skin cancer, visit these sites:

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration — www.fda.gov/cdrh/tanning.html
- National Cancer Institute — http://cancernet.ci.nih.gov/wyntk_pubs/skin.htm
- American Association of Dermatologists — www.aad.org/PressReleases/tanbedshotbed.html



The ISMA, with approximately 8,000 members, works for physicians in public, private and governmental sectors to promote sound health care policies.

322 Canal Walk, Indianapolis, IN 26202-3268 • (317) 261-2060 • Fax: (317) 261-2076 • www.ismanet.org