

# Health & Medicine

## The Truth About Tanning Beds



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### The scientific and statistical evidence on tanning beds is overwhelming:

The Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), part of the World Health Organization, recently moved indoor tanning devices into the highest cancer risk category: “carcinogenic to humans,” a category that also includes tobacco, arsenic and mustard gas.

The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) reports that melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, is the second most common cancer in women 20 to 29 years old and that the incidence of melanoma in women in that age group has tripled in the past three decades.

Nearly 70 percent of tanning salon patrons are female, primarily aged 16 to 29 years old, according to the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The NCI also reports that women who use tanning beds more than once a month are 75 percent more likely to develop melanoma when tanning bed use started before age 35.

More than 30 million Americans use tanning beds each year. A recent AAD study of 116 U.S. cities found an average of 42 tanning salons per city, which means

tanning salons are more prevalent in urban areas than Starbucks or McDonalds.

The AAD released a survey of 3,800 young people nationwide in May of this year that found the majority of indoor tanners are aware that using tanning beds can cause skin cancer. Yet most of the young women surveyed planned to continue tanning indoors because they thought tan people looked more attractive.

The YouTube video *Dear 16-Year-Old Me* shows what can result from this kind of thinking as young adults in their 20s and 30s reflect on their bouts with melanoma caused by overexposure to ultraviolet radiation during their adolescent years. This video can be viewed on YouTube.com by searching *Dear 16-Year-Old Me*.

This does not bode well for the health of our nation, particularly for our young women, daughters and grand-daughters.

Melanin in our skin protects our bodies by absorbing solar ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Excessive UV radiation, whether from the sun or a tanning lamp, causes direct and indirect DNA damage to the skin. Our bodies naturally seek to repair the damage and protect the skin by creating and releasing more melanin into the skin’s cells, which darkens the skin’s color.

A tan is not a “healthy glow,” it’s a sign of skin damage. It is imperative that we reach out to young people and young adults to correct this misconception that a tan is synonymous with good health while reinforcing the message that a tan is the body’s response to damage from ultraviolet radiation.

To date, more than 30 states restrict access to indoor tanning equipment, either banning use by minors or

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requiring parental consent. The New Jersey Senate and Assembly health committees recently approved legislation banning salons from serving minors even if they have their parents’ permission. A 10 percent consumer tax on tanning beds was enacted as part of the recent federal health care legislation, both to discourage tanning bed use and to help fund health care reform. However, laws and regulations can only go so far.

Young people may dismiss thinking about their own mortality, but the damage caused by UV radiation from tanning beds is cumulative to the point of being irreversible. The earlier people start to tan, the higher their risk of de-

veloping skin cancer in their lifetimes—and one in five Americans will, according to the AAD.

If we can educate young people to avoid cigarettes, we should also be educating them to avoid tanning beds. It’s important that young people, and society at large, embrace reality and stop viewing people with tans as healthy or sexy.

When it comes to our health, prevention is one of the most valuable tools we have. We need to educate young people—and adults as well—about the risks of indoor tanning and encourage healthy decisions to help prevent skin cancer.

Fortunately, most skin cancers can be cured, including melanoma, if diagnosed

and treated at an early stage. That’s why it’s important to visit a Board Certified medical dermatologist if you have a mole that has changed in color or size or a new skin condition that is unusual to you.

*Dr. Wendy Myers is a Board Certified medical dermatologist. She grew up in central New Jersey and completed her M.D. at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, where she received numerous academic achievement awards. She completed her medical dermatology residency at the University of Vermont as Chief Resident. To learn more about Windsor Dermatology, visit [www.WindsorDermatology.com](http://www.WindsorDermatology.com) or call 609.443.4500.*