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Beware the Dangers of Tanning Beds

During the cold winter months, many like to daydream about relaxing on a tropical island populated by vital, scantily clad people with sun-tanned skin. But the reality for most of us is that we live in the Northeast, so we can expect a couple more months of cold, short days. More importantly, the vision of healthy suntanned people is also a dream, but many of us refuse to accept this reality. Our culture has come to value tanned skin as more attractive than pale skin, and we mistakenly assume a tan gives us a health appearance.

Even when people know that a tan is not healthy, they continue to pursue a tanned look despite its health hazards. Not only do people continue to burn themselves in the sun throughout the warm months, but more people are using indoor tanning beds to achieve a darker look throughout the year. Multiple studies in recent years reveal that millions of Americans use tanning salons each year, and many of the users are adolescent girls and young adult women. Research conducted by the Case Western Reserve University School of medicine and the University Hospitals in Cleveland surveyed 6900 teens and found that 37% had used an indoor tanning facility at least once, and 30% have used such a facility 3 or more times. Further, as girls get older, their use of tanning salons increases dramatically. According to a study published in the Archives of Pediatrics, 11.2% of 13-14 year old girls had been tanning 3 or more times, and by 18-19 years of age, 47% of the girls had been tanning a minimum of 3 times.

This trend to tan has continued despite a warning issued by the World Health Organization in 2005 advising people younger than 18 not to use tanning beds because it can raise their risk of skin cancer. While cancer rates in general are decreasing in the United States, skin cancer rates are rising. It is the most common form of cancer in this country, with over 1 million new cases diagnosed annually and 1000-2000 Americans dying each year. While the association between UV exposure and melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, has been established for some time, recent research has found that “people who reported any use of tanning devices were 2.5 times more likely to develop squamous cell carcinoma and 1.5 times more likely to develop basal cell carcinoma than people who did not report using tanning devices.”

Like the sun, tanning beds expose the skin to damaging ultraviolet radiation (UV), and some beds release much stronger UV light than the sun. (One source, www.health.learninginfo.org, asserts that tanning beds emit 50-100% more UV rays than the sun.) Not only does excessive UV exposure lead to skin cancer, but it is also linked to eye damage such as cataracts, macular degeneration, and burned corneas, and injures the immune system. Further, damage from UV rays may not show up immediately, and repeated exposure leads to an accumulation of the damage. While in the past, UV-related problems typically manifested themselves in people over 60, at this time, more and more cases are found in adults over the age of 30. In fact, dermatologists report they are seeing melanoma patients in their twenties and late teens now.

Unfortunately, the indoor tanning industry remains largely unregulated. The Skin Cancer Foundation reports that this is a \$2 billion a year enterprise in the U.S., with 28 million Americans “tanning indoors annually at about 25,000 tanning salons around the country.” Even though tanning beds have been shown

to increase the risk of skin cancer and other injuries, there are no laws governing their use. People can, and do, use these devices as long and as often as they wish. While some tanning salons do have restrictions, these rules have been established by the individual salons, and are not uniform or required. Several attempts to regulate the industry by doctors and state and national congressional representatives, but they generally have failed as the tanning industry continues to fight against these measures. At this time, the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control urge people not to use tanning beds, and the American Academy of Dermatology and the American Medical Association are seeking a ban on the sale and use of tanning equipment for nonmedical purposes.

Unfortunately, because our culture views tanned skin as a sign of beauty, changing behavior so that people protect themselves from damaging UV rays is difficult. It has been shown that education alone has not dissuaded people from using tanning beds or lying in the sun. The message that needs to be embraced is that one's natural color is beautiful, and it will take time and effort to undo the false notion that tanning is attractive. Perhaps visualizing ourselves with skin that resembles a tanned animal hide that has turned to leather will help.

Additional information about skin cancer and UV damage to the eyes and the immune system is available from the Skin Cancer Foundation at www.skincancer.org, the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Devices and Radiological Health (888-463-6332) at www.fda.gov/cdrh, and the Federal Trade Commission (877-382-4357) at www.ftc.gov. Information about this or other public health concerns can be obtained from the Central Connecticut Health District (860-721-2822), www.ccthd.org.