The Dangers of Teens and Tanning Beds

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Tanning beds use artificial ultraviolet (UV) radiation to darken your skin. Millions of Americans use tanning beds. In fact, 15% of U.S. adults, almost 16% of U.S. teenagers, and about one in three Caucasian high school girls report using tanning beds.

Some people think that tanning indoors is safer than tanning in the sun. But both ways of getting a tan are dangerous, and both cause skin cancer. Tanning beds are proving to be especially deadly for young people.

**How Tanning Beds Cause Cancer**

Like the sun, tanning beds emit ultraviolet (UV) rays. There are two major types of UV rays that give your skin more color—and damage it.

* **UVB rays** are “short wave” rays; they tend to penetrate only the top-most layer of your skin called the epidermis. This can cause your skin to redden and burn. For a long time, people thought that only UVB rays damaged skin.
* **UVA rays** are “long wave” rays that penetrate into deeper skin layers than do UVB rays. UVA rays stimulate the pigmented cells in your skin (melanocytes) to produce a substance called melanin, which makes you tan. Tanning beds primarily use artificial UVA rays. Research is beginning to show that it is UVA rays that actually cause the majority of skin cancers, including basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and the most fatal form of skin cancer, melanoma. UVA overexposure is also responsible for premature skin aging.

**Tanning Beds Are Mistakenly Thought to Be Safe**

Many people think it’s safer to use a tanning bed than to sit in the sun, but this is simply not true. Here are two major misconceptions about tanning beds being safe:

* **Tanning beds use the “safer” UVA rays (Not True).** Tanning beds primarily use artificial UVA rays, which some people think are less dangerous than UVB rays. But UVA rays cause most skin cancer. People who frequent tanning beds may receive nearly five times the amount of UVA radiation as they would from regular sunlight exposure.
* **Tanning beds give you a “base tan” so you won’t burn (Not True).** A suntan (or getting a base tan) can be just as dangerous as a sunburn. So don’t expect to protect yourself from a sunburn by using a tanning bed to get a base tan. In fact, people who tan without getting sunburns have a higher risk of getting cancer because they receive more UV exposure over their lifetime.

**Tanning Beds Are Particularly Dangerous to Teens**

Tanning beds can cause skin cancer in anyone who uses them. People who use tanning beds regularly—for 50 hours, 100 sessions, or 10 years—have a 200% (two-fold) higher risk of developing melanoma than do people who do not use tanning beds. But teens and young people are especially vulnerable to the dangers of tanning beds. Here’s why:

* **Early exposure to tanning beds significantly increases your melanoma risk.** Studies show using tanning beds before you turn 35 increases your likelihood of developing melanoma by 75%.
* **Melanoma is a common cause of cancer in young adults.** Melanoma is the second most common form of skin cancer in people aged 15 to 29 years. And melanoma and basal cell carcinoma rates are increasing more quickly in young women than in young men. Scientists attribute this to the fact that more young women use tanning beds than young men.
* **Melanoma is deadly.** If melanoma spreads through your skin to your lymph nodes, you have a 62% chance of surviving five years. The statistics are worse if melanoma spreads even further in your body: you have only a 15% five-year survival rate.