

“PROM TIME IS ALMOST HERE — DOES YOUR TEEN WANT A TAN?”

Prom time is almost here, and that means thousands of teens are hitting the tanning salons to get that perfect tan for that important night. But before your teen gets a tan, consider this: tanning isn't as healthy as it looks.

Tanning beds have been marketed as a 'safe' alternative to sunbathing outdoors; however, tanning is actually an unhealthy habit. In spite of popular beliefs, tanning salons may not be a good alternative to tanning in the sun, say experts from Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Cancer Council. Research from the American Cancer Society indicates:

- Women who visit a tanning salon at least once a month have a 55 percent greater risk of developing melanoma – the most serious type of skin cancer – than women who don't go to tanning salons.
- For women age 20-29, the risk of developing melanoma is two and a half times greater if they visit tanning salons at least once a month than for women who don't go to tanning salons.

Do you still think it's okay for your son or daughter to visit a tanning salon or to lay outside to get that “perfect tan”? Tanning, whether outdoors or indoors, is caused by UV-A (ultraviolet-A) radiation. This radiation causes damage at an even deeper level than a sunburn and changes underlying skin structure in a way that can lead to skin cancer at a later time. Since UV-A damages the skin at a deeper level, it took scientists longer to determine that it did cause changes that could be precancerous. That is why tanning beds were once marketed as being safe — science had not caught up to them.

Current figures from the American Cancer Society show twice as many cases of melanoma in Americans than were reported 30 years ago, and the numbers are still going up. Researchers are looking for a science-based alternative way to tan safely. In the meantime, tanning salons advertise a “base tan” that can offer protection from sunburns, and young women seem to be buying it. A recent study showed that by age 19, nearly half (47 percent) of white women had used a tanning booth three or more times.

“There's a whole tanning industry that's trying to promote ultraviolet exposure as a good thing, and that's a problem,” says Dr. Martin Weinstock, chair of the American Cancer Society's skin cancer advisory group. The problem is because the radiation that causes tanning also causes deep skin changes that can lead to skin cancer.

A tan is a sign of skin that has been injured. And this kind of injury accumulates, so every suntan further damages the skin. In addition, tans speed up the aging process and increase the risk of skin cancer. You don't wish old-looking skin on your son or daughter at a younger age. If you were a “sun worshiper” in your younger days, think about how your skin might look better if you hadn't tanned. You have influence over your children's behaviors. You could also be saving your child from developing some kind of skin cancer in the future. This year alone, about 2,200 people will die of non-melanoma skin cancer, and 7,400 will die of melanoma. One day, your child could be a part of these statistics.

If your son or daughter would like a little more color in their skin, promote a safer

alternative and try one of the many self-tanning lotions on the market. Texas Cooperative Extension and Texas Cancer Council encourage you to take charge of your child's health now, which will lead to a healthier tomorrow.

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