

Tanning: Information for parents and teens

How can I protect my children from getting skin cancer?

Children and teens should **NEVER** use indoor tanning equipment. Parents should lead by example: Don't use indoor tanning equipment and always protect yourself from the sun.

To prevent sunburn:

- Limit the amount of time you spend in the sun, especially between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. If you need to be outside, spend as much time as possible in the shade.
- Wear a hat, and cover up as much as possible with clothing. If it's hot, wear loose-fitting, lightweight clothing.
- Apply a sun block with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 30 on all areas of your skin that will be exposed to the sun. Don't forget your ears, chin and neck. Use a lip balm with SPF 15 as well. Remember to reapply often and after swimming or playing in water.
- Wear sunglasses with UVA and UVB protection.
- Don't use indoor tanning equipment to get a "base" tan before a winter vacation in a tropical destination. Tanning will not only cause skin damage by ultraviolet radiation, but the darkening of the skin only provides an SFP of 3 or 5. You need an SPF of 30 or more to protect yourself from a tropical sun.

Are indoor tanning beds safe?

There is no such thing as a safe tan, whether indoors or outdoors. All tans can cause skin damage that can lead to skin cancer.

The bulbs used in tanning beds give off very intense ultraviolet rays, stronger than the sun's. Some tanning beds can give off UV rays at levels that can be 10 to 15 times stronger than the midday sun.

The earlier you start tanning, and the more you do it, the greater your risk of developing cancer. In fact, using tanning equipment before age 35 can increase someone's risk for developing cancer by 75% (International Agency for Research on Cancer data). The total number of years and hours spent tanning also increases the risk for skin cancer.

How does tanning happen?

The sun has 2 types of rays that send ultraviolet radiation (UVR), which can affect your skin: UVB and UVA.

- **UVB radiation** burns the outer layers of skin and causes sunburns.
- **UVA radiation** makes people tan. UVA rays break through to the lower layers of the skin, where they affect the cells that lead to a tan.

Melanin is the pigment that causes your skin to turn brown. It's the body's natural way of protecting the skin from burning. Some people's bodies naturally produce more melanin, which makes them tan darker and more quickly. But this doesn't mean that they are safe from the risk of skin cancer.

What is melanoma?

Melanoma is the most serious and aggressive kind of skin cancer. It starts in the lower layers of your skin. Because UVA rays can go all the way through a person's skin to the blood vessels and nerves, they can also damage the immune system and make it harder to fight diseases like melanoma.

Even if found early, melanoma can spread quickly from the skin to other organs in the body.

There are other types of skin cancer more common than melanoma, including:

- **Squamous cell skin cancer** is the most common kind of skin cancer. It starts in the flat cells found on the surface of the skin. It responds well to treatment, but if not treated early, it can spread through the body like melanoma.

- **Basal cell skin cancer**, which starts in the cells that live under the squamous cells, responds well to treatment. Although very rare, it can spread to nearby areas if left untreated. It may also disfigure your body or face.

How does tanning cause cancer?

Bad sunburns, too much time spent in the sun without proper skin protection, and using indoor tanning beds all increase the risk of skin cancer later in life. Most non-melanoma skin cancers (like squamous and basal cell, described above) are caused by unprotected sun exposure during childhood and adolescence. Skin cancer can take as little as a few years and as long as 30 years to appear.

Can tanning cause other health problems?

Certain medications and cosmetics can make you sensitive to the sun's rays and cause you to get a sunburn or rash.

Tanning can also cause:

- skin dryness and itchiness,
- nausea,
- your skin to age too soon (making you look older, faster), and
- problems with your eyes, such as cataracts.

Don't tanning beds help make vitamin D during the winter months?

There are many safer ways to ensure you get enough vitamin D during the winter months, including:

- eating "oily" fish such as tuna,
- eating foods fortified with vitamin D such as milk, and
- taking a daily supplement of vitamin D.

Before taking a vitamin D supplement, talk to your doctor about how much is right for you.

Additional resources

- Enjoy the sun safely (Canadian Cancer Society)
(<https://cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/reduce-your-risk/be-sun-safe/enjoy-the-sun-safely>)
- Skin cancer (Health Canada)
(<http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/healthy-living-vie-saine/environment-environnement/sun-soleil/skin-cancer-peau-eng.php>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Adolescent Health Committee

Last updated: December 2022



© 2024 – Canadian Paediatric Society
cps.ca/en/ – info@cps.ca

Available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca