Dear Alice,

I have been going every 2 weeks to a nearby tanning salon in the neighborhood. It is a spa and boutique, among other things, and offers a variety of different beds. The bed I have been using is called "The Saturn" is actually a stand-up machine that you enter into for about 10-12 minutes. It has little UVB rays, and mostly UVA... which I was told by the owner that the UVB are more dangerous since they tend to burn the skin. (Unless I got them confused in my head) Anyway, my mother is really nervous about me tanning. I wanted to know, that if done in moderation (i.e. every 2 weeks), is it really that bad considering the bed I have been using? I'm a girl who, in the summer, goes out to the beach and the pool and while I wear sunscreen, I get pretty dark. Is it ok to keep doing this?

Sincerely,
Paler by the day

Answer

Dear Paler by the Day,

Ah, summertime - a season marked by barbeques and tanning at the pool or beach. Oh what fun - that is, as long as it is not you that is getting barbequed. For those of you who like to get a head start on their summer bronze by using tanning beds, the good news is you are less likely to burn from indoor tanning than from outside tanning. The not-so-good news is that apart from the risk of burning, tanning salons are no safer than sunbathing.

As you correctly heard, there are two types of ultraviolet rays (UVA and UVB rays). Both are emitted by both the sun and the indoor tanning devices. In the past, tanning beds relied primarily on UVB ultraviolet rays to produce a browning effect. However, due to their scorching consequences on the skin, many salons have switched to using tanning beds that emit predominantly UVA (longwave) rays. Unfortunately however, UVA rays are not entirely safe either. They penetrate further into the skin and have been linked to increased risks of malignant melanoma (a form of skin cancer) and immune system damage. Higher incidences of pre-cancerous lesions are now being found in 20 and 30 year olds these days who swear by these ?bronzifying? devices.

If you do decide to continue to tan at salons, you may want to consider wearing goggles. By law, the Food and Drug Administration requires tanning salons to direct all customers to wear protective eye goggles. Closing your eyes, wearing ordinary sunglasses, and using cotton
wads do not adequately protect the cornea from the intensity of UV radiation in tanning devices. Recent research has shown that too much exposure to ultraviolet rays, including UVA rays, can damage the retina or burn the cornea.

On the other hand, it is O.K. for you to get some sun as long as you wear a sunscreen with a higher SPF (at least 15, depending on how easily you burn) and limit your exposure. You may also want be aware of the type of skin that you have (i.e., how quickly you brown or burn). This information will help you access your sun tolerance. If for some reason you experience any excessive burning or odd pigments or shapes on your skin, you may want to consult a dermatologist.

The bottom line is you can be safe, and still have fun!

Alice!
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Skin Conditions

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