Dear Alice,

I have been going every two 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 ten to twelve 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 two 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,

Indoor tanning (i.e., the use of a tanning bed, tanning booth, or sunlamp) has become a popular method of tanning, with more than nine million people in the United States going to salons each year. Contrary to popular belief though, indoor tanning isn?t safer than tanning outdoors. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, whether from the sun or from an artificial source, increases the risk of developing different types of skin cancer such as melanoma and certain carcinomas. As far UVA and UVB rays go, indoor tanning devices emit both and each one can increase risks to your health (more on that in a bit). While the risk is present no matter how often you go tanning in- or outdoors, there are some precautions and alternatives that may keep you safer and reduce your risk.
First, a bit more about the two types of UV rays: UVA rays are longwave rays that penetrate to the deeper layers of the skin and are often associated with allergic reactions such as rashes. UVB rays are shortwave rays that penetrate the top layers of skin and are most responsible for sunburns. Both UVA and UVB rays damage the skin and can lead to various types of skin cancer. Indoor tanning methods use UVR emitting lamps that emit both types of UV rays. In the past, tanning beds relied primarily on UVB rays to produce a browning effect. However, due to their severity on the skin, many tanning salons have switched to using tanning beds that emit predominantly UVA rays.

No matter the predominant type of UV exposure, research suggests that there's cause for concern with indoor tanning. Recent studies examining the relationship between indoor tanning use and melanoma have revealed some concerning correlations between the two. Indoor tanning has been found to be particularly dangerous for younger users. There is increasing evidence that shows that indoor tanning during childhood and early adult life increases the risk of certain types of skin cancer, including melanoma, the deadliest type of skin cancer. In the past few years, due to adverse health effects, indoor tanning has become restricted in some areas, especially for minors. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) now requires indoor tanning devices to be labeled with a visible, black-box warning stating that use by those under the age of 18 is not advised. However, since the federal government doesn't officially mandate age restrictions for indoor tanning, each state or city has its own laws. Tanning in general can also lead to photoaging or premature aging of the skin. This can result in dark spots, wrinkles, and skin with a leathery texture. Though not an immediate result, premature skin aging is a recognized side effect of long-term UV exposure that can appear years after an initial sun tan or sunburn.

If you do decide to continue with indoor tanning, you may want to consider following a few precautionary measures offered by the FDA. A major risk from indoor tanning is experiencing eye injuries from too much exposure to intense UV radiation. Failure to wear appropriate protective eyewear, such as goggles, can lead to short- and long-term eye injuries. Aside from appropriate eye protection, it's advised that you follow the manufacturer's recommended exposure times on the label since overexposure can lead to burning. You might also take into consideration any medications, products, or cosmetics you're using as some may make you more sensitive to UV radiation. Talking with a health care provider about your indoor tanning use and any medications or products you're using may be wise to reduce this risk.

Lastly, to get a tan without the rays, have you considered a method that doesn't require UV radiation? Sunless tanning products, containing an FDA-approved (when properly applied to the skin) color additive called dihydroxyacetone (DHA), stain the skin and fade over a period of time. It's good to keep in mind though that DHA is that it's approved for external use only and may cause harm if inhaled or gets into other mucous membranes, such as the mouth or eyes. While it’s worth looking into whether these may be an option for you, perhaps there's a way to have your tan and reduce your risk, too!

The bottom line is that any exposure to UV radiation may be harmful, outdoor and indoor tanning alike, and using proper sun protection and taking precautions may mitigate these risks. And, it may also be helpful to remember that skin in any shade is a good look.

Alice!

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