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Why Teens Are Obsessed With Tanning

It looks hot, it feels good, and any downsides seem way off in the future. But skin cancer is striking more young people now

By JULIE RAWE

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—With reporting by With reporting by Sean Scully/ Philadelphia

Aug. 7, 2006

Kylie-Ayn Kennedy, 16, likes to get to the tanning parlor first thing in the morning. "The beds are cooler," explains the honor student in Easton, Pa. "By the end of the day, they're really hot when you get into them. After five minutes, you're sweating to death." So Kennedy, who has a summer job waitressing, likes to tan early--and often. Her favorite salon charges \$6 a session or \$40 for a month of unlimited use. "When I get my paycheck, I'll buy a month, and I'll go every day or every other day," she says. "I try to get in there as much as possible to get my money's worth."

Kennedy is one of the estimated 2.3 million teens who pop into a tanning parlor at least once a year, helping make indoor tanning what an industry trade group says is a \$5 billion-a-year business. While many go only in the spring to get ready for the prom, more and more are seeking year-round "bronzitude," according to dermatologists, who are alarmed by the risks of so much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation. A survey of nearly 1,300 teenagers in Boston and Minneapolis--St. Paul, Minn., conducted in 2000 by researchers at Harvard and the University of Minnesota, found that 42% of girls had tried indoor tanning.

Easy access to insta-tans, doctors say, may be contributing to a frightening spike in skin-cancer rates among the young. The incidence of melanoma, the most lethal form of skin cancer, has doubled in the U.S. since 1975 among women ages 15 to 29. This year 2,050 of them are expected to be diagnosed with the malignancy. "Skin cancer used to be something old people got," says Dr. James Spencer, a clinical professor of dermatology at New York City's Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "Not a month goes by that I don't see somebody in their 20s now. That was unheard of 10 years ago." Doctors worry about the long-term consequences of adolescent tanning. The World Health Organization estimated last week that up to 60,000 deaths worldwide are caused each year by excessive UV exposure and urged youths under 18 to steer clear of indoor tanning.

Concerned legislators around the U.S. have been looking for ways to enforce this

recommendation. Last month New Jersey became the third state to prohibit children under 14 from using tanning parlors. New Hampshire and North Carolina require a doctor's consent for patrons in that age group, while Wisconsin has banned indoor tanning for anyone under 16. Many states require parents' permission for teenage customers. A bill requiring written consent for those under 18 is working its way through the legislature in Pennsylvania, which leads the nation in number of professional tanning salons, with an estimated 1,525.

But such measures may not do much to curb rotisserie-style teendom. For one thing, parents often give the go-ahead. It was Kennedy's stepmother who first took her to a tanning salon four years ago, and her aunt regularly accompanies her now. Likewise, her friend Sabrina Hendershot, 16, irradiates herself indoors a dozen times a year--with her mother's permission. "My mom doesn't really like that I do it," she says, "but she says it's O.K. as long as it's not all the time."

The real challenge is combatting the adolescent culture that currently encourages compulsive tanning. In some circles--Kennedy's cheerleading squad, for instance--a year-round tan is becoming part of the uniform. "All the girls who are really tanned all through the year--they're the popular girls," Hendershot says. Images of perpetually bronzed pop icons such as Paris Hilton and Jessica Simpson reinforce a tan's value. So do members of the opposite sex. "Guys are always complimenting girls on their tans," Hendershot notes. And some are joining the tanning-bed trend themselves, she confides. "Their girlfriends make them go," she says, although "no guys admit it."

"We're fighting a Darwinian struggle here," says Dr. Sandra Read, a dermatologist in Washington and member of the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention. "We're hardwired to look at color--vividness--as a sign of health and attractiveness and a potential good partner to mate with." A knowledge of the risks can hardly compete with that kind of programming. Like many teens, Kennedy shrugs off the in-the-distance downsides: "It may make my skin wrinkle a little bit earlier, but I'm going to look good while I can."

The analogy to a teenager's fatal attraction to smoking has not been lost on the medical community. Doctors point out new evidence that tanning, whether indoor or out, may be somewhat addictive. Small-scale studies by researchers at North Carolina's Wake Forest University indicate that tanning may trigger endorphins, which could be why sunbathing feels so relaxing and why frequent tanners experience withdrawal-like symptoms if they don't get their regular fix. So public-health officials and consumer advocates are taking lessons from the antismoking movement. Not only are they pushing for laws to curb young people's access to salons, but some have gone so far as to suggest raising taxes at the tanning booth. Lawsuits against the industry are also part of the strategy. In June, the first class action for indoor-tanning consumer fraud was filed against Hollywood Tanning Systems, in Mount Laurel, N.J., which operates one of the largest tanning chains in the U.S. The suit accuses the company of promoting UV lamps as a healthy alternative to outdoor tanning, likening a "safe" tan to a "safe" cigarette.

The tanning industry defends itself by insisting that it's better for tanners to control their UV exposure with a timer in a salon than to sunbathe amid solar-radiation levels that vary not only from day to day but from hour to hour. Industry defenders also

point out that dermatologists prescribe indoor tanning--to treat such conditions as psoriasis. "To suggest that there is no safe alternative to outdoor tanning--or that any tanning is bad for you--is ridiculous," says Hollywood Tanning chairman Ralph Venuto. The bottom line, says John Overstreet, executive director of the Indoor Tanning Association, is that "everyone agrees that what you need to avoid is being burned."

But dermatologists say any change in skin color, whether a golden tan or a beet-red sunburn, is a sign of UV damage. So much for the idea that a base tan is a form of protection, says Drusilla Hufford, director of the Environmental Protection Agency's stratospheric-protection division: "You are still very, very vulnerable."

To get the word out to kids at an early age, the EPA has shipped free SunWise kits to more than 13,500 elementary and middle schools. Arizona last year started requiring its public schools to participate in the program, which explains UV risks and emphasizes the use of sunscreen. But to reach teens and pierce their aura of invincibility, dermatologists are getting a lot more graphic. Some visit schools to display photographs of people with seemingly normal complexions alongside pictures filtered to reveal how freakishly mottled their skin really is from UV damage. Others show close-ups of oozing moles.

But many public-health advocates acknowledge that no message from doctors is as powerful as one from an appealing spokesperson who can compete with the gorgeously bronze Hilton and Simpson. Brittany Lietz, 21, may be a candidate. Slim, blond and incredibly frank, the nursing student was crowned Miss Maryland last month and will compete in the Miss America pageant in January, with skin-cancer awareness as her platform issue. She has already spoken dozens of times to kids about how she was a hard-core tanning-bed user--baking three or four times a week for 25 minutes a session--until she learned that the nickel-size mole on her back was a potentially life-threatening melanoma. Lietz says she gets the rapt attention of young audiences when she shows them some of her 27 surgical scars, including an 8-in. track on her back. "They really do have a look of shock on their faces," she says. "I want to scare them," she adds, "because nobody else is."

Lietz, along with dermatologists everywhere, is trying to steer teens away from tanning beds and the sun and get them to use sunless tanning lotions instead. The beauty queen tells high-schoolers how she tried some 30 different lotions before she found one that didn't look too orange or streaky. But it's a tough sell. Hendershot concedes that everyone "oohed" and "aahed" when one local girl got a fancy spray-on tan. "Personally, I wouldn't do it," she says. "I don't know why." And that's the inexplicable resistance that dermatologists are hoping will fade away.