

Many Teens Circumvent Tanning Bed Laws

Though operators largely follow the rules, the laws are too lax, study shows

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MONDAY, Sept. 21 (HealthDay News) -- Tanning bed operators appear to be largely abiding by parental consent laws, but the laws don't go far enough in limiting teens' exposure to harmful ultraviolet rays, a new study shows.

Tanning bed operators told data collectors posing as 15-year-old girls that as long as they had parental consent, they could tan as often as they wished, the researchers said.

That runs counter to a U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommendation to limit exposure during the first week to no more than three sessions -- which experts say is already too much.

"Tanning is a carcinogen for everybody, but especially for teens who are very interested in looking tan and don't often think about the consequences of any of their behaviors," said study principal investigator Joni A. Mayer, a professor of public health at San Diego State University. "Our data and other data indicate that those under age 17 need to be banned from tanning beds."

The findings are published in the September issue of *Archives of Dermatology*.

Rates of skin cancer have been rising in the United States, particularly among women aged 15 to 39, according to background information in the study. Exposure to UV radiation from indoor tanning lamps has been linked to both melanoma and squamous cell cancer. For young women, using tanning beds for the first time before age 35 increases melanoma risk by as much as 75 percent, previous research has shown.

In response to skin cancer concerns, 28 states had laws as of 2005 that put some restrictions on indoor tanning, and 21 states required parental consent, mostly a parental signature, according to the study.

Several states have tighter legislation pending, including banning teens under age 18 from using tanning beds altogether; requiring parents of minors to be present in front of tanning bed operators when they sign the consent form; and requiring consent forms to specify the precise number of tans that are permitted.

In the study, data collectors posing 15-year-old girls called 3,647 tanning businesses across the United States and told them they were fair-skinned and had never tanned before.

About 87 percent of tanning salon operators told the girls they needed parental consent, including nearly 93 percent of those in states with parental consent laws and 78 percent of those in states without such laws.

Although about 11 percent of the facilities limited teens to the FDA-recommended three or fewer sessions the first week, 71 percent of facilities said teens could tan every day if they wished.

While tanning bed operators said they would require parental consent, Dr. David Fisher, director of the melanoma program at Massachusetts General Hospital, said he wondered if staff at tanning salons actually followed through on that when presented with a paying customer.

"They may be underestimating just how bad this really is," Fisher said. "The concern I have is that in real life, a 15-year-old, fair-skinned girl is not going say 'Hello, I'm fair-skinned. Do you require my parent's permission? They may say, 'Hi, can I get a tan? I'm 19.'"

In July, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer put tanning beds in its highest cancer risk category -- "carcinogenic to humans." The international panel also called for tougher warnings and restrictions on tanning bed use.

"We probably know more about the identity of the culprit in melanoma than any other cancer in the world," Fisher said. "We should have the steepest decline of any cancer, and in fact we have the steepest increase of any cancer. It's enormously embarrassing and frustrating."

In another study in the September issue of *Archives of Dermatology*, researchers from University of Colorado found that tanning is associated with a proliferation of nevi, or moles and other skin discolorations, in non redheaded, very fair-skinned children.

Multiple benign or atypical nevi are a strong risk factor for the development of melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer.

More information

The [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) has a state-by-state guide to tanning bed rules for minors.