

# Teen Tanning: Indoor Sizzle Can Overcome Parental Consent Laws

## Researchers Say Stronger Tanning Restrictions Needed

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Ten years ago, Brittany Zele, then 14, begged her mother for permission to go tanning. Although her mother eventually consented, Zele now wishes her mother hadn't.

"I needed a note from my mom, and she didn't want to let me go, and I kept bugging her," recalled Zele. "I tanned until I was diagnosed. I don't blame her. She didn't know any better."

Five years ago, while sitting on a swing with her mother and boyfriend, her mom said a mole on Zele's thigh didn't look right.

Zele went to see her dermatologist, who removed the mole. About a week and a half later, just before Thanksgiving, the dermatologist called back.

Brittany Zele had melanoma.

Zele shared her story with ABCNews.com in the wake of a study published in the Archives of Dermatology this week, showing that, despite laws, researchers posing as 15-year-olds who had never tanned could, over the phone, get permission to tan at a few salons across the country without parental consent. The study estimated that 90 percent of salons in the U.S. require parental consent.

Researchers also found that at most salons they called, they could begin tanning more often than the government recommendation of three times a week. In 71 percent of the facilities, they could tan every day right away, despite the risks of melanoma and other skin cancers.

"The laws as they are currently written are not strong enough to keep teens from tanning," said Joni Mayer, a professor of health promotion and behavioral sciences at San Diego State University and an author of the study. "Part of the reason is parents are giving their consent [to tan]."

Many doctors expressed dismay at the state of regulation for the tanning industry.

"As a medical professional subject to intense regulation, it is amazing that the tanning industry is allowed to deliver intensive ultraviolet light to minors with a minimal amount of oversight and enforcement," said Dr. Seth J. Orlow, chairman of dermatology at New York University School of Medicine.

The tanning bed industry attacked the study, however, saying it did not highlight its findings on regulations.

"What is not being highlighted by the authors of this study is that the vast majority of tanning salons require parental consent before allowing minors to tan, regardless of whether or not state law requires them to do so. The tanning industry works with parents to ensure that minors are using sunbeds moderately and responsibly," said Dan Humiston, president of the Indoor Tanning Association, in a statement.

Humiston also pointed out that the researchers looked at frequency, but not the duration of visits to the tanning bed.

While Mayer acknowledged that the college-aged researchers posing as 15-year-olds had not actually gone to the tanning beds, but had merely called (since thousands of salons were included, that would have been financially impossible, said Mayer), she noted that some of the places may have stated a policy they would not have enforced had the students shown up.

## **'I didn't realize how serious melanoma is.'**

Zeke said she believes one of the problems with kids and parents when parents consent to let their kids tan is that they don't understand the severity of melanoma.

"Most people think melanoma [is] just your skin," she said. "It's very frustrating, because people don't realize it can go everywhere in your body."

While Zeke ultimately recovered from melanoma, she recounts the severity of the treatment.

After a plastic surgeon removed the skin surrounding the removed mole, it took her eight weeks to walk or put pressure on her leg. She still has a three-inch scar. She said she has had 26 moles removed.

Additionally, after surgery, Zeke went through treatment that included interferon, an immune-system-modifying drug.

Five days a week for four weeks, she had to go to a facility where she was hooked up to an IV and given high doses of the treatment.

"We referred to that as 'boot camp,'" said Zele of the treatment, which caused fever and nausea.

Following the IV treatment, Zele went through nine months of injections of interferon, given three days a week, which had the side effects similar to the flu.

Zele recalls that she had to stop the treatment twice, and both times the side effects were worse when she resumed treatment.

Since finishing interferon treatment over three years ago, Zele said she suffers headaches, which she blames on the therapy, and memory loss, of which she said her doctors are still unsure if it's related to the treatment.

"I didn't realize how serious melanoma is. I really wish I would have known," said Zele.

## **Sunshine Regulation**

The study has also triggered some debate about whether minors should be allowed to use tanning beds at all.

"In my opinion, tanning should be illegal under age 18, even with parental consent," said Dr. John Messmer, medical director of the University Physician Group in Palmyra, Pa. "It should be taxed to make it less appealing since it serves no useful purpose. When I see a patient with a tan, I put on my 'Oh, my God, what happened to you?' face!"

Other physicians took a more moderate tone.

"My personal impression is that parents are probably in a better position than these researchers to know how much risk they and their children should take, but it is surprising that the tanning establishments wouldn't follow the laws of their states," said Dr. Steven Feldman, a professor of dermatology, pathology and public health sciences at Wake Forest University.

But having undergone treatment for what she feels is the consequence of her past tanning habit, Zele sees a tanning bed ban for minors as a no-brainer.

"[I'm] fully for it," she said. "You can't smoke until you're 18, drink until you're 21, it's really the same thing. I think that law would be great. I wish it would pass. If that was a law when I was younger, I don't think I would have ended up with melanoma."

In her own childhood, Zele said, she tanned under high pressure for seven minutes at a time, during her 15-minute breaks from her job at Big Lots.

"I really thought skin cancer was a rash that could be lasered off and you'd be OK," said Zele.

Now, Zele said, she shares a quote she heard when she speaks about tanning.

"Beauty is only skin deep. Skin cancer goes much deeper," she said.

*Courtney Hutchison contributed to this report.*

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