

Teen tanning salon laws limit access, not exposure

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) – The good news on teens and indoor tanning: Most U.S. salons seem to be obeying state laws that require parents to consent to their teens' bronzing under the lights, according to a new study.

The bad news: Once they've obtained consent, most of those salons will let teens tan every day - even though the Food and Drug Administration recommends no more than three sessions during the first week.

In response to a sharp rise in melanoma, a potentially deadly form of skin cancer, among US women 15 to 39 years old, more than two dozen states have enacted laws requiring young people to get parental permission to use tanning salons.

It's not that exposure to indoor tanning is more dangerous to young people's skin, noted study co-author Dr. Joni A. Mayer of San Diego State University, but that starting earlier leads to a larger exposure to cancer-linked ultraviolet radiation.

For their study, Mayer and her colleagues contacted 3,647 indoor tanning facilities in 116 cities in all 50 states, posing as a fair-skinned 15-year-old girl.

Most - 87 percent - of the salons said they would require the 15-year-old to get her parents' permission to tan, and 14 percent said a parent would have to accompany her, according to the researchers' report in the Archives of Dermatology.

Salons in states with laws addressing youth access to indoor tanning were more likely to require parental consent or accompaniment. Five percent said the girl would not be able to tan at all.

But 71 percent said that they would allow the girl to tan every day during her first week of tanning. In fact, salons often encourage overly frequent tanning by offering "all you can tan" packages, Mayer told Reuters Health. "So of course the more times you go the cheaper each individual tanning session becomes," she noted.

And in Wisconsin, where indoor tanning is banned for people younger than 16, 30 percent of salons contacted said they would allow the 15-year-old to use their facility.

While the current findings seem to show that parental consent laws are working, Mayer noted, she and her colleagues participating in the Controlling Indoor Tanning in Youth project have found that young people living in states with these laws are just as likely as those living in states without them to use indoor tanning salons.

"If the laws were really working to reduce teen tanning you would have seen differences there," she said. (To see how your state's laws on teen tanning rate, go to <http://www.indoortanningreportcard.com>)

Mayer argues that the US should follow World Health Organization recommendations to ban everyone younger than 18 from using indoor tanning salons. France and three states in Australia have already done so, she and her colleagues note in their report.

In the meantime, Mayer offers the following advice to parents: "Indoor tanning causes melanoma. The laws are lagging right now to protect your teen, but you can protect your teen by not giving permission for them to tan and you can encourage them to use the lotions or the spray-on tans which can still make them look tan if they want to look tan without the dangers."

In an editorial accompanying the study, Drs. Andrew E. Werchniak and Linda C. Wang of Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston agree that following the WHO recommendation would both educate parents and restrict kids' access. But they point out that the \$5-billion-a-year tanning industry, which employs about 160,000 people, is "well-organized" and would put up a fight against such legislation.

They have a solution that would allow the industry to keep making money, though: Encouraging fake tans as a healthier alternative.

SOURCE: Archives of Dermatology, September 2009.