RESEARCHERS CONFIRM TANNING BED USE AS MAJOR RISK FACTOR IN DEADLY MELANOMA

Pathology expert discusses rising skin cancer rates in young people

From proms and weddings to vacations and graduations, young Americans – particularly women – are frequenting tanning salons at the brisk rate of 1 million visits per day. While the practice may leave them with a temporary glow, researchers have confirmed that the long-term results are anything but healthy. In fact, a study published in the March issue of the International Journal of Cancer found that tanning bed use before age 35 increases the risk of developing melanoma – the deadliest form of skin cancer – by up to 75%.

"Melanoma is one of the most devastating forms of cancer, and certainly the most serious of all skin cancers," notes Dr. George Hollenberg, MD, a leading pathology expert and founder of Acupath Laboratories in New York. "The most significant known risk factor for this cancer is unprotected exposure of the skin to ultraviolet light -- essentially the modus operandi of a tanning bed -- which makes the link between the two hardly surprising," Dr. Hollenberg adds.

However, experts are surprised that, despite massive public education efforts over the past two decades on the dangers of UV exposure and the more recent warnings about tanning bed use, melanoma rates have continued to rise steadily, particularly among children and young adults. "Melanoma diagnoses are increasing at a rate of 3% each year for children ages 10-19, and more rapidly for young women in their 20s and 30s," Dr. Hollenberg points out. The American Academy of Dermatology has predicted malignant melanoma may become the number-one cause of cancer deaths in America by 2025.

In response to the startling data and statistics linking tanning bed use and melanoma, the International Agency for Research on Cancer – which conducted the study published in last month’s International Journal of Cancer – recommends stiff regulation of tanning bed use. To date, more than two dozen states restrict access to tanning salons by minors, ranging from requiring parental consent to completely banning teens from tanning. Dr. Hollenberg advises, "Whether the practice is restricted or not, young people under the age of 35 should avoid exposure to tanning beds in order to reduce their risk of developing melanoma." He offers these additional preventive strategies as well:

1. **Use sunscreen**: The Centers for Disease Control analyzed data from its Youth Risk Behavior surveys on sunscreen use among teenagers, and the results were far from encouraging. Only 1 in 7 high school students reported using sunblock with SPF 15 or higher, and the number remained unchanged from 1999-2003. Sunblock is the most effective weapon against skin cancer at every age, and should be applied daily no matter the season or the weather, as UV rays penetrate cloud cover.

2. **Wear protective clothing**: Light colored clothing, long sleeves and pants, wide brimmed hats and even UV-protective sunglasses all protect skin from the harmful rays of the sun.

3. **Avoid the sun at its strongest**: Forgo practices like sunbathing, seek shade whenever possible, and accomplish outdoor tasks before 10:00 a.m. or after 3:00 p.m., as the sun’s damaging UV rays are strongest during the midday.

After prevention, early detection is the most important factor in surviving malignant melanoma. According to the National Cancer Institute, Stage I melanoma localized to the skin can be successfully cured in a majority of cases. However, when melanoma spreads to the lymph nodes or other organs, the survival rate drops to just 30-40%, because of the lack of effective treatments for metastatic melanoma. What’s more, melanoma is one of the fastest-spreading cancers, and so the window of opportunity for early detection is quite small. Dr. Hollenberg recommends the following procedures:

1. **Know your skin**: Conduct a skin self exam monthly. Using a full-length mirror and a hand mirror, note the shape, size and color of all moles and other abnormalities, then check for changes on a regular basis. Moles that turn different colors, grow, develop uneven borders, begin to ooze or crust over, or become irritated should be evaluated by a dermatologist promptly.

2. **Report new developments**: In addition to monitoring existing moles, finding new skin growths quickly and reporting them is crucial to early detection of cancer. Melanoma is not confined to moles; it can strike under the nails, beneath the breasts, even on the soles of the feet.
3. **Insist on a biopsy**: While many skin conditions can be managed with a “watchful waiting” approach, melanoma is not one of them. If you suspect melanoma, consult a dermatologist immediately and insist on a biopsy, which is the only way to confirm or rule out a melanoma diagnosis. Biopsies also provide important information, such as the grade and stage of the disease, so that the patient and healthcare provider can devise an effective treatment plan.

“Young people are naturally more fearless than their older counterparts, with a sense of invincibility and a desire for immediate gratification,” Dr. Hollenberg acknowledges. “However, this makes it all the more critical for us to effectively communicate to them the serious and present dangers of tanning bed and other UV light exposure, as well as other preventive and early detection techniques, as melanoma is a disease that offers few second chances,” he concludes.

**About Dr. George Hollenberg**

Dr. George Hollenberg, M.D. is an authority in the fields of pathology, clinical pathology and dermatopathology with expertise in the areas of dysplastic nevi, melanoma, prostate and gastrointestinal cancer. Board-certified in Pathology and Dermatopathology, Dr. Hollenberg is a Fellow of the College of American Pathologists, The American Society of Dermatopathology and the AMA. He has published articles on skin, prostate and gastrointestinal cancer, and is the Consultant in Dermatopathology to The North Shore University Hospital Center. As the founding director of Acupath Laboratories, Inc., Dr. Hollenberg supervises the analysis of tens of thousands of biopsies per year, using the latest cutting-edge technology in histology and immunocytochemistry, as well as the latest advances in computerized report preparation.