

# Melanoma concerns on the rise as rates climb for women, remain steady for men

By Sara Michael

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**BALTIMORE** – Rachel Peterson wasn't thinking about cancer, as she spent countless hours in the sun as a kid, often to the point of painful sunburns.

Even in the ninth grade when she got a membership to a tanning salon, cancer was the furthest thing from her mind. It was cool to be tan. All her friends went tanning. It made her look good.

But in January, Peterson, a blonde, fair-skinned 18-year-old, was diagnosed with melanoma — the deadliest form of skin cancer — and had a small, black mole on her leg removed. Doctors told her she was lucky, that in five years the cancer would have spread "out of control," Peterson recalled.

"I understand it's really popular to be tan, but it's your life you're dealing with," said Peterson, of Bowie, who attributes/blames her skin cancer to her overexposure to Ultra Violet rays.

"It's kind of silly," she added. "All my plans — college, kids — could have been taken away, just to look pretty."

Melanoma rates among young, white women have skyrocketed in the past few decades. From 1980 to 2004, the number of cases among women ages 15 to 39 rose 50 percent, from 9.4 per 100,000 to 13.9 per 100,000, according to a new report from the National Cancer Institute.

At the same time, the rates for young men leveled off.

Researchers also found an increase in thicker, later-stage melanomas, suggesting the rise isn't because of better reporting, said lead researcher Mark Purdue.

The results offer a clue of what's to come — rates in older women may rise in the future, Purdue said.

Most cases of melanoma are treatable with a simple incision, but a minority of cases can recur, spread and be fatal, said Dr. Julie Lange,

professor of surgery, oncology and dermatology at Johns Hopkins University.

"When it begins to spread, it's a disease, frankly, we aren't very good at treating," Lange said.

For Peterson, of Glenn Dale, a scar a few inches long on her right calf is the only sign of her cancer. She spends less time outside and always has on sunscreen of at least 30 SPF.

She also keeps a close eye on any moles, making sure they don't change in shape or size, and visits her doctor every three months.

### **Tanning beds to blame?**

Although researchers didn't study the cause of the increase, they have their suspicions: increased sun exposure.

UV radiation, from the sun or tanning beds, is recognized as the leading environmental cause of melanoma.

"The recent increase in incidence among young women parallels reported trends in exposure to UVR," Purdue wrote in the study. Because the incidence is leveling off among men, artificial tanning is more of a culprit than exposure during childhood, said Dr. Nassif Soueid, director of microsurgery at The Cancer Institute at St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson.

Women are also getting skin cancer in places on their body that wouldn't be exposed to the sun outside but would be receiving rays in a tanning bed, he said.

"I definitely think tanning beds are responsible for increasing the number of skin cancer [cases] in young women," Soueid said.

A tan is a sign of injury to the skin, said Roberta Herbst, coordinator of the Maryland Skin Cancer Prevention Program, which has been pushing for more regulation of the tanning industry.

Beginning in October, anyone 18-and-under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian, according to a recently passed law. Violators face fines up to \$1,000 for multiple violations.

"That's a big step in the right direction," Lange said.

At least 28 other states have laws restricting a minor's use of tanning beds, which usually include in-person or written parental consent, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan research organization.

Herbst's group wants more regulations, including inspections for cleanliness and limits on visits.

In the meantime, they are focused on education.

"It's a hard thing to change society's norms, to change what young girls want to be and look like, the notion that a tan is sexy and attractive and makes you look thin," Herbst said.

There are also a few myths she's working to combat. For example, the argument that tanning beds help people get adequate amounts of Vitamin D, essential for bone growth and produced through exposure to UV rays.

Adequate vitamin D is usually obtained through what Herbst described as "incidental" sun, such as walking to the car, even when wearing sun screen. Fortified foods, such as milk and orange juice, also provide enough vitamin D.

Most tanning beds use mainly UVA rays, which penetrates deeper into the skin and is less likely to cause burns than UVB, which the sun mainly radiates, Soueid said.

Yet, it's UVB rays that are responsible for metabolizing vitamin D, he said, so that benefit is often lost in UVA-heavy tanning beds.

Further, vitamin D deficiency is rare in the United States, and "we don't need to be treated with tanning beds," Soueid added.

Tan-seekers also often argue they need a "base tan" before hitting the beach, and a tanning bed provides the controlled starter color.

But a tan won't provide protection from burns, Herbst said, adding, "there is no such thing as a safe tan."

### **Preaching moderation**

However, the indoor tanning industry fired back at the recent melanoma study, faulting researchers for pointing to tanning bed usage as a possible cause.

"We always preach a message of moderation," said Sarah Longwell, spokeswoman for the Indoor Tanning Association.

Most salons self-regulate, imposing limits on frequency and requiring teenagers to have permission, she said.

But Longwell asked, would you tell a teenager she can't go to the beach?

"This issue is misunderstood, and it's hyped," she said.

Tanning beds offer a controlled environment under a set time, so clients are less likely to burn in a bed than outside, she said.

Longwell likened tanning salons to other indulgences like dark chocolate and red wine. A moderate amount can be beneficial.

"There is no risk to moderate exposure to UV light. Excessive exposure carries some risk," she said.

At Harbor Lights tanning studio in Baltimore, owner Matt Gischel relies on his clients to be truthful about how frequently they have been tanning.

"We try to have our customers be as honest with us as possible so we can be conservative and walk that fine line [between] overexposure and underexposure," he said, adding his salon is certified by the Indoor Tanning Association.

Gischel's salon also has a policy that teens 16-and-under must have parental consent to tan. Most of clientele are older, so he doesn't anticipate the new state law having an adverse affect on his business.

### **That invincible feeling**

Peterson is still skeptical her anti-tanning message will get through to teens and young women. Miss Maryland 2007 Brittany Lietz, who was Peterson's dance coach, was diagnosed with melanoma — and her warnings fell on deaf ears.

"I just didn't listen to her," said Peterson, who now has become a spokeswoman for the Maryland Skin Cancer Prevention Program. Her image will grace posters to be hung in area high schools this fall, warning teens of overtanning.

But many teens and young women feel invincible — like Peterson did — and are far more concerned with looking tan than worrying about cancer. It may be unrealistic to tell young women to never tan, Peterson said, but at least she wants them to stay away from tanning beds.

Erin Fennell, a 20-year-old Towson senior, visits a tanning bed about four times a week at her apartment complex in Towson. She doesn't think much about cancer anymore, even though her grandfather had melanoma.

"After a while I just really wanted to go and get a tan," Fennell said after a tanning session in the University Village Apartments.

"It does bother me when I think about it, but I just figure I'm young so I don't have to worry about it."

### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW**

- About 1,100 new cases of melanoma will be diagnosed in Maryland this year (about 62,500 nationwide).
- Melanomas account for 10 to 20 percent of all skin cancers but result in about 90 percent of all skin-cancer-related deaths.
- Nearly 8,000 people diagnosed with melanoma each year will die from the disease.
- The main risk factor for developing melanoma is childhood sunburn.
- In men, melanoma is more common on the back or head and neck; in women, it is more common on the back or the back of the legs.
- Melanoma can develop in a pre-existing mole or arise in normal-appearing skin. A mole that has uneven border, shape or color is often suspected as melanoma.

**Sources:** Maryland Skin Cancer Prevention Program, which is funded through the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Johns Hopkins Melanoma Program

### **CELEBRITIES WITH MELANOMA**

- Troy Aikman, former Dallas Cowboys Hall-of-Fame quarterback
- Sen. John McCain, presidential hopeful
- Sam Donaldson, TV journalist
- John Milford, actor who helped create Hollywood Walk of Fame (died of melanoma)
- Bob Marley, reggae legend (died of melanoma and brain cancer)
- Maureen Reagan, daughter of President Ronald Reagan and political analyst (died of skin cancer)
- Burgess Meredith, actor best known for his role as Mickey in the "Rocky" movies (died from melanoma and Alzheimer's)

**Sources:** Savingskin.com and the Tiffany Weirbach Melanoma Foundation

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