

Go for the glow or ban the tan? Is it safe to use sunbeds?



This is not a new issue. Already in 2006, the Scientific Committee on Consumer Products provided an Opinion on the biological effects of ultraviolet radiation (UVR) from sunbeds. There, it was stated that using UVR tanning devices was likely to increase the risk of malignant

melanoma of the skin and possibly ocular melanoma. It was recommended for young people under 18 years to avoid sunbeds.

A few years later, in 2009, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified the use of UV-emitting tanning devices as carcinogenic to humans.

In light of new evidence, the European Commission asked the Scientific Committee on Health, Environmental and Emerging Risks (SCHEER) to update the previous Opinion on this topic.

→ HAVEN'T SUNBEDS WITHSTOOD THE TEST OF TIME?

The knowledge about the links between skin cancer and radiation has increased over time. Sunbeds have been around since the seventies so it might seem that they have a good track record. However, the consequences of using sunbeds can take years to develop and people may pay the consequences for having used sunbeds long after they used them.

→ WHAT DOES THE NEW EVIDENCE SUGGEST?

There are now enough long-term data collected to know that sunbed use is responsible for a noticeable proportion of both melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers and for a large fraction of melanomas arising before the age of 30.

In Europe, almost 3500 of 63942 new cases of melanoma diagnosed each year may be related to sunbed use, women representing 68%.

→ ARE MANY CASES OF SKIN CANCER ATTRIBUTABLE TO SUNBED USE?

In Europe, almost 500 women and 300 men may die each year from a melanoma as a result of sunbed use. The increase in melanoma risk associated with sunbed use in the general population is significant. It is more than 15%, with most of the risk concentrated in the population who started using sunbeds before the age of 35 (+75%). This risk increases proportionally with the number of and frequency of sessions.

→ IS EVERYONE AT RISK, OR ONLY VERY FAIR AND SUSCEPTIBLE PEOPLE?

Although sunbed use is inadvisable for anyone, people who are fair or who have freckles, atypical or multiple moles or a family history of melanoma should particularly avoid using UVR tanning devices.

→ DOES SUNBED USE HELP THE BODY PRODUCE VITAMIN D?

Yes, but there is no need to use sunbeds to boost vitamin D levels, even in winter. Hands and face outdoor exposure for about 15 minutes a day, even in cloudy weather, combined with a balanced diet should provide for sufficient levels of vitamin D. If this proves to be deficient, dietary supplements can be taken.

→ ISN'T BUILDING UP A TAN BY USING SUNBEDS SAFER THAN RISKING SUNBURN?

It is necessary to avoid sunburn, which raises the risk of skin cancer. Scientific evidence does not support the idea that it is safe to 'build up' a tan. People can be over-exposed to UV through the use of sunbeds, just as they can be from the sun.

Both sunbeds and sunlight can prompt the development of skin cancer and both accelerate photo aging. Going outdoors is beneficial, but even so, people are advised to avoid the sun in peak hours. If that is unavoidable, appropriate clothing, sunscreen

and sunglasses need to be worn. Even occasional use elevates the risk of skin cancer, particularly if this exposure is before the age of 30.

→ WHAT IS THE CONCLUSION OF THIS OPINION?

Ultraviolet Radiation (UVR), including that emitted by sunbeds, is considered a complete carcinogen, in that it can initiate and promote cancer.

The SCHEER concludes that:

- there is strong evidence that UV radiation from sunbeds causes several skin cancers (skin melanoma, squamous cell carcinoma and basal cell carcinoma), and may also cause ocular melanoma;
- there is no safe limit for exposure to UV radiation from sunbeds.

Consumers should be fully aware about the risks of using sunbeds for cosmetic purposes and in case their choice is to use them despite understanding the risks, they should take precautions. Those who are serious about protecting their health would be better off avoiding sunbeds altogether – especially if they are under the age of 30, have family history of melanoma or/and are fair or have freckles.

This factsheet is based on the Opinion of the independent Scientific Committee on Health, Environmental and Emerging Risks (SCHEER): 'Biological effects of ultraviolet radiation relevant to health with particular reference to sunbeds for cosmetic purposes'.

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This opinion is available at:
http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/scheer/opinions/index_en.htm