Medical Xpress

States consider banning teens from tanning beds

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(AP) -- If a proposed law passes, California teens under 18 will need a fake ID to "fake and bake" themselves to a golden brown.

Citing skin cancer risks, legislators have joined lawmakers in at least 21 other states who have debated bills this year to ban or restrict tanning bed use by minors.

Teens under the age of 14 are already banned from tanning beds in California, and older teens need parental permission. But lawmakers in the Golden State are considering banning anyone under age 18 from using tanning beds, even if a parent says it's OK.

Sen. Ted Lieu, who proposed the more stringent legislation, says the parent signatures on permission forms are often forged, and tanning salons benefit financially by looking the other way. The bill has been approved by the Senate and faces review by the Assembly policy committee Tuesday.

Lieu chides vain teens who make a habit of slipping into tanning beds, saying they're short-sighted because "you will age doing this. Your skin will look more leathery later on."

According to the Food and Drug Administration, exposure to UV radiation, whether from the sun or a tanning bed, can cause skin cancer, burns, premature skin aging and eye damage. Approximately 30 million Americans visit tanning salons every year, and 2.3 million of those are

teens, the FDA says.

"There is no such thing as a safe tan," according to the agency. "The increase in skin pigment, called melanin, which causes the tan color change in your skin is a sign of damage."

In 2009, a World Health Organization research group classified UV-emitting tanning beds as "carcinogenic," adding that health officials should strongly consider restricting minors' access to sunbeds. WHO, the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Dermatology all support legislation banning the use of sunbeds and lamps for teens younger than 18.

Tanning businesses across the country are feeling the heat.

Along with California, lawmakers in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania are considering banning tanning beds for people under age 18. Similar legislation failed this year in Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota and New Mexico.

Legislators in Massachusetts are considering a ban for teens under 14 or 16 in two separate bills. Lawmakers in Florida, Kentucky, Vermont and Washington rejected such measures this year.

John Overstreet, a spokesman for the Indoor Tanning Association, said sunscreen sellers are behind the legislative push and tanning beds are not proven to cause melanoma, the most deadly type of skin cancer.

California's bill is sponsored by the state's dermatology association and a cancer research group called AIM at Melanoma, which lists major drug companies, including Pfizer Inc. and Bristol-Meyers Squibb Co., as its sponsors.

Overstreet said business owners in his trade group worry that the legislation would hurt small businesses already struggling in the current economy. There are now about 878 tanning businesses in California, a number that's seen a 24 percent drop since 2009 because business has cooled, he said.

In areas where teens do a lot of tanning like college towns or affluent areas, Overstreet said, the legislation could mean a 10 percent hit to tanning salons' income.

"UV tanning is by far what people want," said Overstreet, saying tanning is a personal choice that shouldn't be interfered with by government.

"Tanning lamps and beds are designed to mimic the noontime sun, and you use them a measured amount of time," he said.

But according to American Academy of Pediatrics, powerful tanning beds produce radiation levels up to "10 to 15 times higher than that of the midday sun" and frequent tanners get a level of radiation that is not found in nature.

More than a million cases of skin cancer were diagnosed in the U.S. last year, according to the American Academy of Dermatology.

Cancer survivor Lisa Andrews, 41, said she shouldn't have trusted tanning salon salespeople for medical advice. As a teenager, she went in for tanning bed stints one to three times a week in the winter months.

"I've always lived in California, and I wanted to have the blond hair and the brown skin and live up to all that California girl stuff," said Andrews, who now protects her naturally pale skin with religious use of sunscreen. "I remember thinking I was so ugly when I was my own skin color."

At age 35, she was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma on her leg, and she is now vigilant about watching her skin for signs of cancer. She attributes the cancer to her time in the tanning bed, which she also came to rely on for the euphoric buzz she would feel after the experience.

Exposure to UV rays from tanning beds or the sun may be addictive because the radiation may cause release of endorphins in the skin, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

For the past five years, Long Beach resident Samantha Healey has slipped into a tanning bed up to four times a week.

"I almost get, like, re-energized," the 23-year-old said.

Healey has worked in tanning salons in California and Nevada and says rebellious teens do try to forge their parents' signatures.

Wayne LaVassar, who owns 14 tanning salons in the Los Angeles area, says he requires parents to come in to sign permission slips at his California Tanning Salons. Requiring in-person authorization would be an appropriate middle ground instead of a ban, he said.

Missouri lawmakers are considering a bill this year that would require parents to sign off on their children's tanning, but similar measures failed in Connecticut, Nevada, South Dakota and West Virginia.

In North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island, legislators are weighing whether a doctor's note should be required for teens under 18. Iowa and Washington rejected such a requirement this year.

LaVassar said he doesn't understand why legislation is moving in so many states when tanning beds are overseen by the FDA and parents should have the right to make decisions for their kids.

"I don't believe the sun is bad for you. I believe too much sun is bad for you," he said. "We should be sending a message of moderation and responsibility."

More information:
AIM at Melanoma: http://www.aimatmelanoma.org

Indoor Tanning Association: http://www.theita.com

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