

Focusing on appearance may reduce tanning in young women

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Focusing on the negative effects indoor tanning can have on appearance appears to reduce indoor tanning behavior, even among young women who report that they tan to relax or alleviate seasonal mood disorders, according to a report in the May issue of *Archives of Dermatology*.

Young people who use tanning beds may be at risk of [melanoma](#) and other skin cancers, according to background information in the article. Interventions to reduce [skin cancer](#) risk often focus on motivational techniques to reduce tanning and other [risky behaviors](#), such as not using sunscreen. "For example, it might be expected that a health-based intervention would work best for individuals who exhibit strong health-related motivations, while an appearance-focused intervention would be recommended for individuals primarily motivated by appearance concerns," the authors write.

Joel Hillhouse, Ph.D., of East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, and colleagues studied 430 adult female indoor tanners on one college campus. A total of 200 were randomly assigned to receive a booklet that included information about the history and current sociocultural context of tanning, along with the potentially damaging effects of tanning on the skin. The booklet also gave recommendations for reducing [indoor tanning](#) and offered healthier options to enhance appearance, including exercise, choosing fashion that does not require a tan or using sunless tanning products. The other 230 did not receive the booklet.

All participants were assessed for seasonal affective disorder and four

pathological tanning motives: the feeling that one's tanning is out of control; evidence of tolerance to the effects of tanning; the belief that one's natural skin tone is unattractive and unappealing; or opiate-like reactions to tanning.

Tanning frequency was re-assessed six months after distributing the booklet. Overall, the booklet reduced tanning behaviors, even for participants who reported a pathological motive for tanning. "In other words, providing young patients who tan with information on the damaging effects of tanning on their appearance is effective even if they are addicted to tanning or using it to ameliorate depression symptoms," the authors write.

Tanners with pathological motives may also care about their appearance, the authors note. In addition, the appearance-focused booklet may have had unintended effects on non-appearance motivations. For instance, those who tan to relax or relieve stress may have become more anxious after reading about the potential harms of tanning.

"Emphasizing the appearance-damaging effects of UV light, both indoor and outdoor, to young patients who are tanning is important no matter what their pathological tanning behavior status," the authors conclude. "Still, tailored interventions may be able to better address some individual motivations for tanning and their relation to psychopathology. The best methods for delivering these powerful messages and for matching message communication to individual preferences remain to be explored so that this promising intervention approach to skin cancer prevention can have a wider impact across varied settings."

More information: Arch Dermatol. 2010;146[5]:485-491.

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