

Study finds dramatic rise in skin cancer in young adults

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Even as the rates of some cancers are falling, Mayo Clinic is seeing an alarming trend: the dramatic rise of skin cancer, especially among people under 40. According to a study by Mayo Clinic researchers published in the April issue of *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, the incidence of melanoma has escalated, and young women are the hardest hit.

"We anticipated we'd find rising rates, as other studies are suggesting, but we found an even higher incidence than the [National Cancer Institute](#) had reported using the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Result database, and in particular, a dramatic rise in women in their 20s and 30s," says lead investigator Jerry Brewer, M.D., a Mayo Clinic [dermatologist](#). Researchers conducted a population-based study using records from the Rochester Epidemiology Project, a decades-long database of all patient care in Olmsted County, Minn. They looked for first-time diagnoses of melanoma in patients 18 to 39 from 1970 to 2009. The study found the incidence of melanoma increased eightfold among young women and fourfold among young men. The [lifetime risk](#) of melanoma is higher in males than females, but the opposite is true in [young adults](#) and adolescents, Dr. Brewer says.

Researchers also found [mortality rates](#) from the disease have improved over the years, likely due to early detection of [skin cancer](#) and prompt medical care.

"People are now more aware of their skin and of the need to see a doctor when they see changes," Dr. Brewer says. "As a result, many cases may

be caught before the cancer advances to a deep melanoma, which is harder to treat."

The researchers speculate that the use of indoor tanning beds is a key culprit in the rising cancer rate in young women.

"A recent study reported that people who use indoor tanning beds frequently are 74 percent more likely to develop melanoma, and we know young women are more likely to use them than young men," Dr. Brewer says. Despite abundant information about the dangers of tanning beds, he adds, young women continue to use them. "The results of this study emphasize the importance of active interventions to decrease risk factors for skin cancer and, in particular, to continue to alert [young women](#) that indoor tanning has carcinogenic effects that increase the risk of melanoma."

Janey Helland, of Mapleton, Minn., didn't think twice when tanning in high school and college.

"I used tanning beds to get ready for homecoming and prom," she says. "In college, I tanned before a trip to Barbados because I didn't want to get sunburned." At age 21, Helland noticed an abnormal spot on her leg. It was melanoma, and the diagnosis changed Helland's life. "I really didn't know what my future was going to look like, or if I'd even have one."

Two years later, she is cancer-free and dedicated to educating others. "I would advocate that it's better to be safe than sorry," she says. "My advice is to educate yourself and research the risk factors."

Childhood sunburns and ultraviolet exposure in adulthood may also contribute to [melanoma](#) development, the researchers say.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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