

There's no such thing as a safe, healthy tan

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Dear Mayo Clinic: My daughter wanted to go to a tanning bed before prom, but, instead, she opted for a spray tan. But a lot of her friends are going to a tanning bed and think it's relatively safe. Is there such a thing as a tanning bed that doesn't damage the skin?

A: The short answer to your question is no. Tanning beds are not safe, and there aren't any that don't damage the [skin](#). Your daughter is smart to avoid [tanning](#) beds and choose a spray tan instead to get the look she wants for prom.

Tanning beds have been around for many years, and some people believe using them to get a tan is safer than exposure to sunlight. That is simply not true. Exposure to ultraviolet, or UV, radiation damages your skin, whether the exposure comes from tanning beds or natural sunlight.

The type of UV radiation emitted by most tanning beds is called UVA. It prematurely ages your skin, causing wrinkling and age spots. UVA exposure also raises the risk for skin cancer, including melanoma, the deadliest form of [skin cancer](#). According to a study from researchers at the University of North Carolina, roughly 263,000 skin cancers occurred in the U.S. in 2015 that were attributable to indoor tanning bed use.

Because of the health dangers, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration now requires all tanning beds to carry a warning label stating that people under 18 should not use them. Several states have passed laws against children and teens using tanning beds. Many dermatologists would like to

see tanning beds outlawed for children and adults alike, nationwide.

Another common misconception about tanning beds is that using one prior to a tropical vacation to get what's sometimes called a "base tan" will protect against sunburn once a person reaches the sunny destination. Again, there's no basis in fact here.

Using a tanning bed before you spend a lot of time in the sun just means you're exposing yourself to more UV radiation. The best way to prevent sunburn on a sunny vacation is to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a [sun protection factor](#), or SPF, of at least 30, and reapply it often. For the best skin protection, couple sunscreen with a broad-brim hat, and wear sunglasses and other sun wear such as sun-protective clothing.

The bottom line is that there's no such thing as a healthy tan, unless it's an artificial tan that comes from a spray or lotion. The spray tan your daughter opted for is a fine choice. The active ingredient in spray tans and other [sunless tanning products](#), such as lotions and creams, is the color additive dihydroxyacetone. When applied to the skin, it reacts with dead cells in the skin's surface to temporarily darken the skin and simulate a tan. The coloring typically wears off after a few days.

Just keep in mind that most sunless tanning products don't contain sunscreen. If a product contains sunscreen, it will only be effective for a couple of hours. The color produced by a sunless tanning product doesn't protect your skin from UV rays. If you use a sunless tanning product and spend time outdoors, you still need a broad-spectrum sunscreen to keep your skin safe from UV radiation.

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