

Sunless tanning may not be the answer to preventing skin cancer

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Many advertisements, articles and reports make bold statements regarding sunless tanning products—sprays, ointments, creams, foams, or lotions that promise tan skin without the increased risk of skin cancer that goes along with outdoor sunbathing or indoor tanning. But, do people who use sunless tanning products actually avoid these "bad" behaviors? Few studies have investigated this topic and this led Matthew Mansh, MD, Resident in the Department of Dermatology, University of Minnesota Medical School and University of Minnesota Health, to question whether he should recommend sunless tanners to his patients.

In the study "Characteristics and Skin Cancer Risk Behaviors of Adult Sunless Tanners in the United States," published in *JAMA Dermatology*, Mansh and fellow University of Minnesota Medical School researchers sought to assess the demographic characteristics and [skin cancer](#) risk behaviors of adult sunless tanners in the United States. They wanted to find out if adults who used sunless [tanning](#) products were able to reduce risky behaviors such as indoor and outdoor tanning. They found little evidence they did.

More than 27,000 adults were part of this study—about 6.4% reported sunless tanning. Sunless tanning was most common among young, white, college-educated females and gay and bisexual men. Other factors associated with sunless tanning included living in the Western United States and having a family history of skin [cancer](#).

"For the most part, adults who use sunless tanning products continue to

engage in risky tanning behaviors," said Mansh. Adults who used sunless tanning products were more likely to use indoor tanning beds and report a recent sunburn and were less likely to wear protective clothing or seek shade when outdoors. Among people who used indoor tanning beds—which are known to cause skin cancer—sunless tanning product users actually visited tanning salons more frequently than those who did not.

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States. According to the American Academy of Dermatology Association, approximately one in five Americans will develop skin cancer in their lifetime.

In the general population, it appears that most people use sunless tanning products to supplement rather than replace risky tanning behaviors. Mansh said this observation concerns him from a public health standpoint.

"Most evidence supports that sunless tanning products are safe to use and do not cause skin cancer. However, these products can only be effective at reducing skin cancer rates if they are able to help people disengage in risky behaviors such as [indoor tanning](#) or outdoor sunbathing. Our study casts doubt on whether that assumption is true and suggests that [sunless tanning products](#) could inadvertently reinforce desires to achieve tanned [skin](#)," said Mansh.

Provided by University of Minnesota Medical School

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