

The knockout tan can be hazardous

by Roberta Franchuk

Thanks to the advent of the tanning salon, people can now sport uniform tans even during Edmonton's eight-month winter.

A tan is seen as a way of improving one's looks — "It's just like getting dressed up," says Loni Kupchanko, co-owner of Beach on Whyte, a tanning salon located near the university, "you feel better about your personal appearance."

The largest users of these facilities are people in the late teens to early thirties, with women outnumbering men.

Tanning beds have been widely used in Europe for years, and are growing rapidly in popularity in both Canada and the United States. California is one of the states with the largest use of tanning beds — even people that work indoors all day need to have the "California image" tan.

The principle behind a tanning bed is simple. Patrons are encased in a metal shell with specially designed light bulbs to toast their skin to a healthy glow. But debate rages over whether this procedure, designed to make you look healthy, is actually harmful.

Tanning is a reaction of your skin to the ultraviolet rays in sunlight. Special cells in your skin produce a pigment called melanin in response to ultraviolet (often called UV) light and this pigment darkens with continued exposure — hence, a tan. However, UV light does more than this. It can also interfere with the DNA of skin cells and cause errors in cell replication — in severe cases, this translates to skin cancer.

The story gets even more complicated, though. UV light is broken down into three types based on the wavelength range.

UVC light is very harmful to DNA and is used for sterilization since it kills bacteria. Fortunately, solar UVC is screened by the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere and does not reach the earth.

UVB light has been implicated in the formation of skin tumors in humans, and is present in natural sunlight. It is responsible for tan-

ning, sunburns, and premature aging of the skin.

UVA light has relatively weak tanning power, but it also contributes to aging and wrinkles. It is used as treatment for some dermatological problems such as psoriasis and acne.

The cancer-causing properties of UV light are proven. Medical journals are full of experiments on white mice and people tracing the effects of UV light on skin, and all conclude that, as dermatologist Dr. Jack Brown puts it, "Sunlight is bad for you."

Skin cancer is now the most common kind of concern in the United States, with 700,000 new cases per year. Sunny Texas has a much higher death rate from skin cancer than the national U.S. average.

Tanning salons do not take this information lightly. They cite studies which suggest that cancer only occurs as a result of damage to the skin, such as a severe sunburn (second or third degree). Kupchanko points to the higher frequency of use of suntanning beds in Europe to refute the "fallacy that it (suntanning) causes cancer."

What medical experts do disagree on is how much exposure is needed for damage or cancer to occur. UVB is a proven carcinogen, and most suntanning beds have low to nonexistent UVB light.

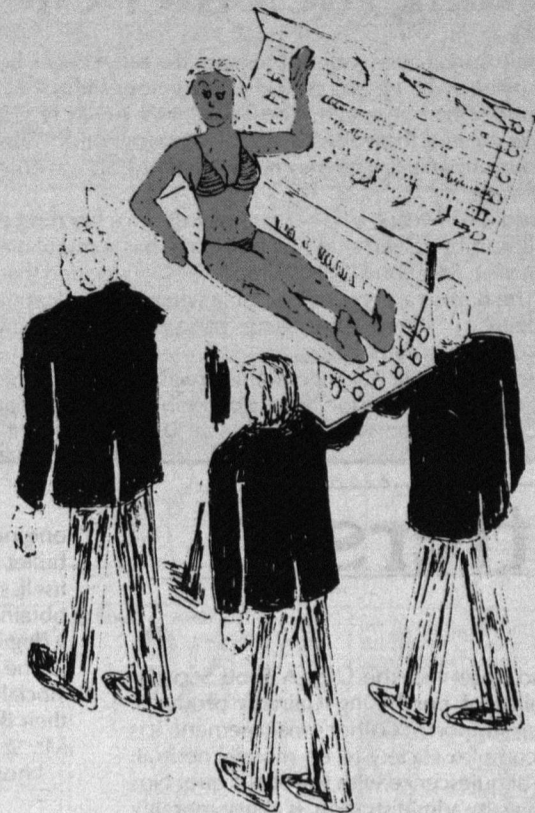
But, he continues, the damage done by a regular tanning session is not as severe as that caused by lying on a beach all weekend.

However, UVA light has been implicated in tumor formation, both in conjunction with UVB and on its own. A 1984 study by Dutch photobiologists suggested that repeated and prolonged exposure to pure UVA light could result in cancer.

Therefore, many people suggest that the chance of damage is proportionate to the degree of expo-

sure. As Dr. Brown puts it, "the more sunlight you get, the more wrinkles you get." But, he continues, the damage done by a regular tanning session is not as severe as that caused by lying on a beach all weekend.

"Most people," according to Kupchanko, are "not really concerned about the health aspects" of tanning. More wonder about the possibilities of burning or skin dryness. Many people use tanning salons as a method of getting a pre-tan before journeying to some exotic sunny locale in the middle of winter, rather than to stay constantly dark, but the possibility for abuse does exist. With the medical establishment still divided over exact figures and theories of damage related to UV exposure, caution in all forms of tanning would seem to be the best alternative to staying indoors all year.



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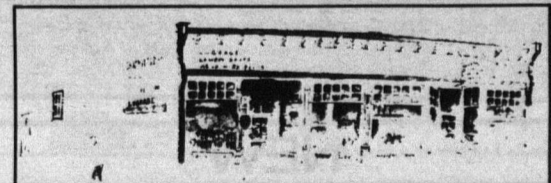
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