Permanent skin damage from too much sun often is done before age 18: a NetWellness column
by Patricia Brinkman/Ohio State University

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Ask anyone suffering from skin cancer -
tanning is a bad idea!

According to the American Cancer Society,
overexposure to sunlight and other forms
of ultraviolet radiation is thought to be the
major risk factor not only for basal and
squamous cell skin cancers, but for the
more serious melanoma, as well.

Skin cancer is the most common type of
cancer, with one in five Americans
developing skin cancer at some point in
their lifetime. While the vast majority of these are basal cell skin cancer -- the
least dangerous -- the number of melanomas is on the rise.

The American Cancer Society estimates that
more than 68,500 people will be diagnosed with
melanoma this year. More than a million
Americans are diagnosed with some type of skin
cancer each year, and more than 11,000 die.

Even though cancer usually doesn't develop
until later in life, skin damage from sun
overexposure builds up over time, and once
damage occurs, it can't be reversed. In fact,
experts say the most serious and lasting damage
occurs before age 18.

Sun damage can't be reversed

The sun emits three types of ultraviolet rays:
UVA, UVB and UVC. UVC isn't a problem -- it's
absorbed by the ozone layer in the Earth's
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atmosphere. But UVB rays cause sunburn as well as skin cancer and premature aging of skin. UVA rays stimulate tanning but are also linked with other problems such as cataracts and other eye problems, premature aging of skin, wrinkling, loss of skin elasticity, skin rashes, and allergic or other reactions to drugs.

UVA and UVB are both designated as causes of skin cancer by the National Institutes of Health.

Use protection and avoid tanning beds

Everyone is encouraged to protect themselves from these rays by using a sunscreen with an SPF (sun-protection factor) of at least 15, or 30 if you have fair skin, which is more susceptible to the harmful effects of UV rays. At the very least, wear a hat and sunglasses when you’re out in the sun.

Tanning beds also give off UV rays, and a 2006 study in the International Journal of Cancer found a strong association between the use of tanning beds and the risk of developing melanoma. Still, nearly 2.3 million American teenagers visit tanning salons every year.

Make sure your family understands the facts before working on their tans this year.

More information is available from three Ohio State University Extension fact sheets:
• Sun Exposure: Precautions and Protection
• Skin Cancer: Are You At Risk?
• Ultraviolet Radiation

More detailed information can be found at:
• American Cancer Society
• Skin Cancer Foundation

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