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That Killer Tan Deserves to Be a Fashion Faux Pas

**By Melanie Reynolds
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The first Queen Elizabeth never would have allowed the sun to spoil her porcelain skin. In fact, the 16th century monarch used a skin whitener – made of toxic lead – to enhance her pale complexion. Some courtiers had themselves bled to get that popular pallor.

Right up until the early 20th century, fair skin was highly fashionable. It was a symbol of beauty, wealth, and refinement. People did all they could to protect against sun exposure. Long skirts, full-length sleeves, large-brimmed hats, and dainty parasols were essential summer accessories. Only manual laborers, forced by their status to toil outdoors in the sun, would have been caught dead sporting a tan.

In the late 1920s, social attitudes changed. Medical experts discovered that sunlight could play a role in treating tuberculosis and rickets. Fashion magazines began advocating tanning, and people began actively seeking the sun. Bronzed skin became a symbol of a “healthy” lifestyle.

It also replaced pale skin as a mark of privilege. A tan announced to the world that you had the money and leisure to travel to tropical climes, where it was easier to cultivate that “glamorous glow.”

Paying the Price

Tanning was all the rage when I went to high school. I worked as a lifeguard for several summers and considered myself lucky to get paid to sit by the pool and work on my tan. No way would I put on a prom dress until every hint of pallor was gone. Tan lines were humiliating.

I paid the price several decades later. I was diagnosed with basal cell skin cancer caused by overexposure to the sun’s ultraviolet rays when I was young. I underwent Mohs surgery and have worn sunscreen religiously ever since.

Today we know that 90 percent of all skin cancers are associated with exposure to ultraviolet light, whether from the sun or an indoor tanning device. It's a major public health concern.

It's no coincidence that the incidence of skin cancer began rising dramatically soon after tanning became the "in" thing to do.

The Scary Statistics

You hear a lot these days about the dangers of sun exposure and the importance of protecting your skin. In case you still need to be convinced of the folly of tanning, here are a few scary skin cancer statistics:

- Over the past three decades, more people have had skin cancer than all other cancers combined.
- Melanoma, the most deadly kind of skin cancer, is the only common cancer in the nation whose incidence is increasing. Between 2000 and 2009, it climbed 1.9 percent annually, according to the National Cancer Institute.
- The American Cancer Society estimates that 73,870 new cases of melanoma will be diagnosed in our country this year; 9,940 people will die of the disease.
- The World Health Organization has classified UV tanning devices (tanning beds and sun lamps) as among the most dangerous causes of human cancer.
- Just one indoor tanning session increases a person's chance of developing melanoma by 20 percent.
- The risk of melanoma increases by 75 percent among people who use tanning beds before the age of 30.
- Regular daily use of a broad spectrum SPF 15 or higher sunscreen – applied liberally and often – reduces the risk of developing squamous cell skin cancer by 40 percent and melanoma by 50 percent.
- A recent poll found that 58 percent of Americans are concerned about skin cancer, but only 11 percent use a sunscreen with an SPF 15 or higher everyday.

It's past time for another shift in our cultural attitude. Let's acknowledge that there's no such thing as a "safe" tan. Let's encourage people to love – and protect – their skin, whatever its natural hue. Glowing, healthy skin is what makes everyone look their best.

Tanning is not fashionable or flattering. It's NOT a sign of health. It's a potential killer.

Until we stop associating tanned skin with beauty, we won't make much headway against skin cancer.

For more information about skin cancer and how to protect yourself, visit the Skin Cancer Foundation at www.skincancer.org or the American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org/cancer/skincancer/.