

Solariums

The desire for a tan has been part of the Australian culture since the middle of the 20th century. This, combined with the fact that Australians are exposed to the highest levels of ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure in the world, has led to an epidemic of skin cancer. Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world.

Public education campaigns about the dangers of UV radiation have resulted in a decline in sunburn rates. However, even though most people know about the risks of UV exposure, increasing numbers of Australians are using solariums to develop a tan. There has been a 600 per cent increase in the number of solariums in Melbourne in the past 10 years. Their persuasive marketing methods attract increasing numbers of customers to their services.

Solarium tans are not safe tans

Many people believe that solariums offer a 'safe tan'. In fact, research shows that using solariums increases your risk of skin cancer and contributes to the premature ageing of your skin.

Solariums and UV radiation

The difference between the UV radiation emitted by solariums and that generated by the sun is the type and intensity of UV radiation. Solariums produce concentrated doses of UV radiation that can be up to five times the strength of the midday summer sun.

UVA radiation

UVA radiation represents most of the radiation used in a solarium. It penetrates the deepest layer of the skin and causes:

- Deterioration of the skin
- Premature ageing, wrinkling and loss of elasticity
- Reduced collagen levels
- Blotchiness and pigmentation.

UVB radiation

UVB radiation is the other part of the radiation used in a solarium. It penetrates the uppermost layer of skin and is the main cause of sunburn and skin cancer. Use of solariums can also result in minor skin irritations such as rashes, itchiness and dryness.

UVA and UVB can both cause skin cancer

Until recently it was believed that UVB was the sole cause of skin cancer. We now know that both UVA and UVB are responsible for causing skin cancer.

When the eyes are exposed to UVA in a solarium, the cornea and the conjunctiva may become inflamed and sight may be damaged. This may lead to cataracts and temporary blindness.

Certain prescription drugs, like antibiotics and diuretics, and some cosmetics, can increase a person's sensitivity to UV radiation emitted by solariums.

Solariums are not a safe 'pre-tan'

Solariums are often advertised as a way to 'pre-tan' for the hotter weather, protecting your skin from burning in the sun. On average, a tan from the sun only provides the protection equivalent of an SPF4 sunscreen. A tan developed in a solarium offers even less protection. Tanning in a solarium does not make it any safer to tan in the sun.

Australian Solarium Standard and solarium regulations

The Australian Solarium Standard AS2635-2002 includes guidelines for installing, maintaining and operating commercial solariums. It recommends that solarium operators provide a consent form for all clients to read and sign at their first solarium session. This form has details about the risks associated with deliberate UV radiation exposure.

The code is voluntary

The Australian Solarium Standard is a voluntary code of practice in Australia. This means there is no law which compels solarium operators to provide clients with consent forms or inform them of the full health risks of using solariums. There is also no law which states they must turn people away if their skin is inappropriate for tanning, however, they would be breaching the Australian Standard if they allow these fair skinned people to use their services.

A study conducted by The Cancer Council Victoria in 2003 suggests poor compliance with the voluntary code. The study found that 52 per cent of 16 year olds, who should provide parental consent, gained access to solariums without consent. Fair skinned customers, who have very sensitive skin that never tans, and are therefore at higher risk of skin cancer, were accepted as customers by 90 per cent of the solariums involved in the study.

Training not required for solarium staff

Anyone can own and operate a solarium. There is no requirement for solarium equipment to be serviced or regulated. There is also no regulated training for people who operate a solarium. If you use a solarium, you have no way of knowing whether the equipment is reliable or if the operator is professionally trained.

Avoid the risk of solariums

Be proud of your natural skin colour. Taking care of your skin now will help prevent premature ageing and reduce your risk of skin cancer.

If you must tan your body, a fake tanning method that doesn't use UV radiation is preferable. But if you do visit a solarium, check that they provide a consent form. This way, you will know that they are aware of their obligation under the Australian Standard. Avoid combining indoor tanning with outdoor tanning and always wear protective goggles. Never tan on your face.

The Cancer Council Australia and the Australasian College of Dermatologists do not support tanning in solariums in any circumstances.

Where to get help

- The Cancer Council Victoria. Tel. 131 120
- Your doctor
- SunSmart's website www.sunsmart.com.au

Things to remember

- A solarium tan is not a safe tan.
- Each time you deliberately expose your skin to UV radiation, in the sun or in a solarium, you increase your risk of developing skin cancer.
- UV exposure is the leading cause of premature ageing.
- The Australian Solarium Standard is a voluntary code of practice. There is no requirement for the regulation and servicing of solarium equipment or training of staff.
- Tanning in a solarium does not make it safer to tan in the sun.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Cancer Council Victoria

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