



# COVER UP? OR SOAK IT UP?

## A Point/Counterpoint Look at Sun Exposure

By Francesca Lyman

To be bronze was to be beautiful. Before senior prom and Spring Break, Sarah Aasheim spent weeks sunbathing—like most of her 1987 graduating class—even indulging in a 10-session tanning bed package to burnish her bathing-beauty look. “I never thought of myself as a sun worshipper,” she says, “but my behavior wasn’t that different than my friends. We’d cover ourselves in baby oil and spray our hair with lemon juice. We just wanted to look tan.”

Aasheim and her friends didn’t give a lot of thought to protecting their skin. Having spent her childhood outdoors in the sun, hiking and running in Michigan’s plentiful parks, she’d later work though college as a day-camp director for her local parks and recreation department. She continued tanning right up until she was diagnosed with Stage 1 melanoma, ten years later at age 28. “It was really terrifying,” confesses Aasheim, convinced her life-threatening disease was due to too much ultraviolet (UV) radiation. She now keeps her pale skin out of the sun.

Today, on Puget Sound, the scene is similar to that of Aasheim’s teen years. It’s a place populated by fiercely outdoorsy types craving sunshine. After enduring months of characteristically dreary, cloudy, winter weather, people want that bronzed look—despite their mostly fair complexions. Just before senior prom, once again, indoor tanning salons will see their busiest season

as they send out packages and promotions and pack their appointment books. “People like to get that bake in before getting into the real sun,” says Leah Truselo, a 23-year old college student and local tanning salon worker in suburban Seattle.

Psychologically, too, tanning helps people living in the Northwest get through their long dark winters. But Seattle, Washington’s combination of sun deprivation three-quarters of the year and searing sun during the summer makes it an interesting laboratory for an emerging controversy. In this city of clouds and rain, many people are disinclined to take the warnings of exposure to UV rays seriously. Some even believe the new theory getting widespread media exposure: Tanning may be a healthy way to prevent burning.

“Dermatologists don’t like us doing this,” admits tanning bed user Randy Schultz, a Kirkland, Washington, massage therapist, “but I believe there are other health benefits if I’m careful, don’t burn, and moisturize afterwards.”

Despite a huge volume of medical studies linking unprotected sun exposure to skin cancer—enhanced by new evidence that depletion of the Earth’s ozone layer, which shields us from

harmful UV rays, is feeding this scourge—another side of the health question surrounding sun exposure has emerged. A new group of medical researchers argues that avoiding the sun and using sunscreens may be depriving us of vital sunlight and vitamin D, which helps protect us from many chronic diseases—including diabetes and osteoporosis—and a host of common cancers, including skin cancer.

What should health-minded, outdoors-loving people do? Should we cover up and protect ourselves, as doctors tell us, or head back into the sunshine for a bit more vitamin D? Let’s take a closer look at both sides of the debate.

### **POINT:** **Watch Those Rays!**

For years, we’ve been warned about getting too much sun because skin cancer rates around the world are rising at alarming rates, faster than any other cancer. Today, one in five Americans each year is expected to get some form of skin cancer in their lifetimes, according to the American Cancer Society. More than one million cases are expected next year in the United States alone and 13 million cases around the world.

But growing awareness of the epidemic hasn’t changed many Americans’ habits. “A lot of people have the impression that skin cancers are treatable and not very dangerous,” says Randy Lo-

Earth’s ozone layer has  
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max, chairman of the Melanoma Research Foundation (MRF). “But skin cancer and its most deadly form, melanoma, have flown under the radar of people’s worries.”

Over the past 75 years, the lifetime risk for an American to develop melanoma has increased to about 20 times what it once was. Particularly alarming, notes Lomax, is melanoma’s sharp rise among young adult women. Last year, National Cancer Institute researchers observed that between 1980 and 2004, melanoma among young women between the ages of 15 and 39 in the United States increased 50 percent. Like the researchers who conducted this study, Lomax suspects that this cancer spike is likely fueled by the indoor tanning craze and also fed by “confusion about the dangers of ultraviolet ray exposure.”

One common misperception is that

we have to live in constant sun to be at risk. When the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) singled out Seattle and Washington State as targets for its SunWise sun protection campaigns, residents were dumbfounded. Tell them to wear sunscreens here, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter Carol Ostrom quipped, “and they’re likely to fling moss at you.”

But that’s precisely why the EPA chose to focus on this region, with its surprisingly high rates of skin cancer. “People think that if it’s cloudy, they’re not getting UV rays,” says Tony Brown, a public affairs director in EPA Region 10, headquartered in Seattle. “Yet, Seattle and Washington state ranked fifth in melanoma nationwide.”

The official word on tanning, the process by which human skin turns varying shades of brown in response to the sun’s rays, is that it’s a health hazard.

The EPA labels UV light, whether from the sun or a tanning bed, as a proven carcinogen that also causes wrinkling. “There is no other way to say it: Tanned skin is damaged skin,” reads a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention brochure for parents. “Any change in the color of your child’s skin after time outside—whether sunburn or suntan—indicates damage from UV rays.”

The CDC’s cautionary stance makes even more sense, considering the Earth’s protective ozone layer is more diminished today than it was 30 years ago, “says Drusilla Hufford, director of the EPA’s Stratospheric Protection Division. Chemical pollution has caused it to disappear at the rate of about 4 percent globally every decade since 1980, according to the World Meteorological Organization. The rate of depletion is greater at mid-latitudes, such as over the United States, where ozone levels have fallen as much as 10 percent.

Human vanity alone isn’t driving the cancer numbers. According to the American Cancer Society, more than 10,850 people will die of skin cancer in the United States alone next year. More than 75 percent of those cases will be from melanoma, which will strike down more than 65,000 people around the world.

### COUNTERPOINT: Here Comes the Sun!

But what if other cancers and diseases caused by avoiding the sun dwarfed the projected deaths from skin cancer? While too much sun can be unhealthy, humans need enough sunlight each day so our bodies can produce sufficient vitamin D for strong bones and healthy growth, as well as to stave off other diseases.

Today, a growing cadre of scientists is arguing that our lives indoors and our culture of sun avoidance are putting us at risk of many diseases, perhaps more serious than skin cancer. Most Americans, especially those living in the northern latitudes of the United States—above the level of Los Angeles, California, on the West Coast across to

## Darker Skin Needs Protection, Too!

**T**he natural melanin in our skin can block damaging ultraviolet (UV) rays and protect darker-skinned people—who have more of it—from burning as easily as fair-skinned people. Nevertheless, dermatologists warn, anyone can get skin cancer; Jamaican reggae singer Bob Marley died of melanoma. Today, blacks and other dark-skinned people are gradually accepting that being dark is not enough.

Kwesi Coleman, an Everett, Washington, personal health trainer who spent time in the Navy in Palm Desert, California, realized for the first time at age 33 that he could be prone to the effects of sun exposure. “One really hot day in the desert, I noticed a slightly darker line on my arm and felt this new sensation,” he says. “My friends laughed and told me, “Sounds like a sunburn.” Since then, however, he wears sunscreen when biking, kayaking, and on other days when he will get long sun exposure. “I now know I’m not impervious to the effects of UV rays.”

People with darker skin, while less susceptible to melanoma, may also have a tougher time surviving it. According to a 2006 University of Miami study, blacks are more than three times as likely—and Hispanics nearly twice as likely—as Caucasians to be diagnosed with late-stage melanoma. But, why? More detection and prevention efforts are aimed at people with light skin, making them 10 to 30 times more likely to be diagnosed than blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

Dermatologist Dr. Henry Lim, whose Detroit practice brings him a largely black clientele, recommends that they and other darker-skinned people need to wear at least an SPF 15 sunscreen. “Just as importantly,” says Lim, “whether you’re Hispanic, black, or Asian, know that you’re at a higher risk of lower vitamin D levels, which can lead to all sorts of serious medical problems.”

—Francesca Lyman

**Next year, melanoma will strike down more than 65,000 people worldwide.**

Columbia, South Carolina, on the East Coast—don't get enough vitamin D, neither through solar exposure nor through their diets.

As scientists have long known, sunlight is our best natural source for vitamin D, which is produced in the body after as little as 10 minutes of unprotected exposure to the sun. "It turns out that vitamin D is very beneficial to every part of your body," says William B. Grant, a leading researcher on vitamin D and founder of SUNARC, an organization that researches natural sunlight and its benefits. A former NASA physicist who studied remote sensing of the atmosphere, Grant began looking at regional variations in sunlight exposure across different parts of

the United States. In 2002, he found a surprisingly dramatic difference: Twice as many cancer deaths occurred in the Northeast as in the Southwest, differences that couldn't be explained by diet. His theory is that more cancers could be prevented by promoting vitamin D, reasoning that some 50,000 to 70,000 Americans die prematurely each year due to insufficient UV exposure compared with the 9,000 to 10,000 deaths in the U.S. due to skin cancer.

Supporting that position, vitamin D researcher Dr. Michael Holick, an endocrinologist with Boston University Medical Center, argues that people who avoid the sun or who don't get enough vitamin D through diet or supplements could be putting themselves at very high risk of common chronic diseases, everything from multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis to the more common colon, prostate, and breast cancers. He points to a 2008 study that found that women who had a vitamin D defi-

ciency at the time they were diagnosed with breast cancer were 94 percent more likely to have their cancer spread compared to women with adequate vitamin D levels in their bodies.

Rather than promoting diligent sunscreen use, these researchers argue that too much sunscreen can cut our absorption of vitamin D. To make sure our bodies produce enough vitamin D, they even recommend brief periods of unprotected exposure to the sun each day, particularly for the elderly and people with darker skin, who require more. The reason? As we age, our bodies lose the ability to produce vitamin D. And genetically, people with darker skin have less ability to synthesize it when exposed to sunlight.

As researchers on both sides of this debate face off, they have triggered a controversy over whether U.S. guidelines for the "sunshine vitamin" need to be strengthened. The National Acad-



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emy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine has convened a committee to rewrite nutritional recommendations for children and adults, who need more vitamin D as they age. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently doubled their vitamin D recommendation for children to 400 milligrams a day, the equivalent of four cups of vitamin D-fortified milk.

While regulators sort out such matters, health advocates advise getting your vitamin D levels tested through a simple blood test. "It's particularly important for darker-skinned people to get their levels checked since they need as much as five times more vitamin D as fair-skinned people," says Dr. Henry Lim, whose dermatology practice at Detroit's Henry Ford Medical Center includes many blacks.

However, Lim and the MRF's Randy Lomax agree that there's no benefit to tanning outdoors or in tanning beds to

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boost levels of vitamin D when you can use no-risk methods such as supplements or high-vitamin D foods like salmon, cod liver oil, and enriched milk and orange juice.

What advocates on both sides seem to agree on is that people should get adequate sunlight but avoid sunburn, while also insuring that they're not vitamin-D deficient.

On May 22, the Friday before Memorial Day, the EPA and the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention is launching "Don't Fry Day," a public campaign for sun protection. The campaign advocates "Slip, Slop, Slap, and Wrap," code for slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen, slap on a hat, and wrap

on some sunglasses. "It's high time we developed a nationwide campaign of this kind," says cancer researcher Meenhard Herlyn. He contends that U.S. parks and schools should be building shade and sun shelters on a much larger scale, as well as launching public awareness campaigns. He also argues that such community initiatives could help bring down skin cancer rates, as efforts in Australia have done.

Back under a sun hat, Sarah Aasheim, who was later diagnosed with Stage III melanoma when she was 20 weeks pregnant, hopes cases like her own will make young people think twice about intentionally tanning. Now the mother of 6-year-old Sabrina, Aasheim makes sure her daughter is always protected from the sun. "She always puts on a hat in the sun," says Aasheim, "and then she puts on sunscreen, as though it was simply another article of clothing." **P&R**



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