

Young sun worshippers continue to flirt with cancers

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It's 1:30 on a Thursday afternoon, and the pool at Arizona State University Student Recreation Complex is ringed with students lying in lounge chairs, bodies exposed to the sun high in the sky.

It's prime tanning time.

Only a few chairs are left. About 80 men and women have claimed the beige vinyl outdoor reclining chairs. Some are on their stomachs, propped up on their elbows, talking. Some read. Others are plugged into their music.

It's a quiet, purposeful group, most are there with one objective: to get a "healthy" tan.

No sign warns that sunbathing may be hazardous to your health. Just a note on the door to the pool that smoothies, cell phones, food and suntan oil are not allowed on the pool deck.

What compels people — especially when the American Cancer Society says one in five Americans will develop some form of skin cancer during their lifetime — to defy the odds and bare their skin to the possible source of that disease?

"I do worry about it being a risk, but it (sunbathing) relaxes me," says Krystin Maloney, a 19-year-old freshman from Ann Arbor, Mich.

She's in a bikini, reading on a lounge chair. No sunglasses or hat. But she says she has applied sunscreen.

Maloney is concerned more about her appearance than the risks of tanning. "I don't like being pale. I feel it (a tan) makes me look healthier," Maloney says.

Skin cancer is the most common of cancers and for the most part it's preventable, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Researchers at the cancer center have a drug in the Food and Drug Administration approval pipeline and another under research that might prevent skin cancer, but it will be years before they become available, says Dr. David Alberts, who directs the Arizona Cancer Center at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Ariz. He says the risk of skin cancer is increasing because of a thinning ozone layer. Add to that lifestyles that include acceptance of showing more bare skin, and a culture equating a tan with wealth and beauty, and it's easier to understand why the American Cancer Society's estimates for new skin cancer cases climb each year, says Sharon McKenna, coordinator of the Arizona Department of Health Services' SunWise public education program.

What used to be considered a disease for older people is being diagnosed more and more among those 50 and younger, McKenna says.

Eighty percent of a person's exposure to the sun happens before they turn 20. In that time, if they've had a sunburn or two, the risk of skin cancer later in life increases, Alberts says.

Jacky Sims was a 15-year-old high school student two years ago when her mother had to explain to her what melanoma meant. Sims' dermatologist had spotted a suspicious mole on her chest during a routine skin check.



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Terry McMahon, 18, (above, from right) of Chicago, Eric Zitny, 18, of Chicago, and Mollee Pappas, 19, of Minneapolis, sunbathe at Arizona State University Student Recreation Complex in Tempe, Ariz. No signs at the pool warn that sunbathing may be hazardous to your health.



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Jacky Sims, 17, of Phoenix, applies lotion to protect her skin. Sims, who was diagnosed with melanoma, the most fatal form of skin cancer, at 15, speaks to fellow teenagers about the dangers of sun exposure.

A subsequent biopsy revealed she had melanoma, the most fatal kind of skin cancer.

"It hit me between the eyeballs," Sims says. "I remember trying to pick up the phone to tell my boyfriend and I didn't want to say, 'I have cancer.'"

The surgeon removed the cancer. It hadn't spread to her lymph nodes, and she didn't need chemotherapy or radiation. But a month and a half ago, the dermatologist found another melanoma and removed it. This melanoma was shallower than the first. It, too, was successfully removed.

Sims, now 17, no longer lies out in the sun. When she and her friends go to the lake for the day, she wears a long-sleeved shirt.

She doesn't play competitive volleyball but she continues to run track. She puts on a skin lotion daily with a 15 SPF and boosts it to a 45 SPF sunscreen for track practice and meets. She and her girlfriends had spray-on tans for the prom. She is looking for a college on the East Coast, out of the Sunbelt.

For Sims, a tan is ugly.

An American Academy of Dermatology 2003 survey showing that 13- to 19-year-olds use sunscreen less and spend more time in the sun, bucking a trend among adults older than 35 who evidently are paying attention to studies linking overexposure to the sun and skin cancer. The survey showed fewer young people are using sunscreen. In 2003, 34 percent of those younger than 25 used sunscreen, compared with 49 percent in 1996.

Sims says she knows why people her age dismiss the warnings.

"We think we're invincible and that it's not going to happen to us," she says. "We think skin cancer is not really serious. You can just cut it out."

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