A Deadly Lie About Skin Cancer

The suntan you're chasing could be the thing that kills you. In fact, just five sunburns of any degree can double your risk of melanoma.

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This Melanoma Research Alliance's Feature Voices essay is by Keith Tolley

Somewhere right now, there is a 30-year-old sitting in a dermatologist's office receiving a diagnosis of "melanoma" for the first time. She is thinking about the summers she spent at the beach, the tanning beds before prom, the long runs with no sunscreen because the burn always faded into a tan eventually. She is also thinking about how good she felt when people told her that she looked healthy, sun-kissed, and even "glowing."

She believed the lie. Most of us do.

It is a lie that has been built into the mindset of our popular culture. It is a lie that is founded upon a warped definition of what makes someone more beautiful, more handsome, more desirable, and more accepted. We see it in many of the feeds that we scroll through, the media bytes that we watch, and the advertisements that seek to capture our spending.

This lie has been the catalyst for many of us to pursue a short-term "self-improvement" in the form of a tan — without considering the potential long-term risk of pain and suffering. Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, thrives on us wholeheartedly believing this lie. And all it takes is one sunburn, at an early age, to set things in motion for melanoma to begin its work. As a matter of fact, just five sunburns of any degree can double our risk of melanoma.

The lie that we have accepted as truth has two interrelated parts to it. The first part is this — society tells us that a tan from the sun or artificial devices makes a person more attractive, more desirable. The second part of the lie is this — the more sun or UV rays we get, the healthier we become.

Now, because many of us have accepted this lie as truth, we engage in activities that buy into this lie. We lay under tanning beds. We lay out in the sun at the beach, on our patios, and at the pool. We run, we hike, we walk, we work, we ride, we swim, we sit, outside with our skin uncovered and unprotected from the sun. All because we believe that changing the color tone of our skin makes us more attractive, more valued, more enough.

Here's the truth nobody's posting on the feeds that you are looking at each day: the tan you're

chasing could be the thing that kills you. Not decades from now, when you are old and gray — but in your 30s, your 40s, at a time when your life is supposed to be in full gear. You have a 75% increased risk of developing life-threatening melanoma if you start using indoor tanning beds before the age of 35. Melanoma has no interest in negotiating with you, and it really doesn't care how good you look this summer.

One more truth: You were already enough before the sun touched your skin. The version of you that exists right now — untanned, unburned, unwrinkled, and unaltered — does not need more sun to make you more attractive or popular. And you don't need to risk your life to be more of anything for anybody.

Exposing this lie could save you from exposing yourself to danger – or even death.

So, put on the sunscreen. Wear the SPF shirt. Skip the tanning bed.

And the next time the lie shows up — in an ad, in an influencer's post, in your own mirror — call it exactly what it is. A deadly lie.

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