UV4Me Reaches Young Adults About Sun Safety

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By Cody R. Barnett, MRA Director of Communications

Today, more than 1 in 5 Americans are expected to develop skin cancer before they turn 70 years old. In fact, skin cancer is the most prevalent cancer in the United States. Ultraviolet radiation exposure, through the sun or tanning beds, is the leading cause of skin cancer, including an estimated 95% percent of melanomas Americans get lots of UV rays, even during winter activities and vacations.

Among young people, rates of melanoma are especially alarming. It is now the second most-common cancer among young women aged 20–29. While many programs focus specifically on children, studies suggest that we receive over half of our lifetime exposure to UV after the age of 20. Yet, few evidence-based programs focus specifically on the needs of young adults. Carolyn Heckman, PhD, a health psychologist at the Rutgers Cancer Institute, is working to change that with an interactive online program called UV4Me.

“Young adults are at a critical junction. They are transitioning away from their families and are starting to make their own decisions,” says Heckman. “It is an exciting time but it’s also a window associated with higher risk-taking behavior, including indoor tanning. We want to tackle this head on to see if we can make a lasting difference.”

UV4Me Version 1.0

With this in mind, Heckman created and launched the first generation of UV4Me in 2014. The program was the first ever online-only intervention aimed at improving sun safety among young adults. It enrolled 965 young people and randomized them to one of three groups — an experimental arm that got access to UV4Me, a control group that received access to a publicly available informational website, and an evaluation-only arm that was assessed about their sun safety behaviors. The three-arm study allowed Heckman to determine how her program compared to existing options at baseline, week 3, and at week 12.

While all three groups demonstrated decreased exposure to the sun and increased protection

behaviors at 3 and 12 weeks after baseline, the experimental group that was given the full UV4Me curriculum reduced both intentional and incidental exposure the most as well as sunburns. UV4Me was also able to cut indoor tanning in half although the sample size wasn't large enough to show statistically significant change.

UV4Me Version 2.0

Now, further iterating on the promising findings of version 1.0, Heckman and her team have improved UV4Me and have launched version 2.0 with several key upgrades.

"The updated version has been enhanced in several ways to make it more interactive and engaging — such as mobile optimization that allows it to be used from a smartphone. We hope that by making the intervention more accessible and engaging we can improve the effectiveness and make even longer-lasting behavior change."

For young adults, one of the primary motivators for purposefully tanning is appearance. "While it is gradually changing over time, many people still think that tan skin looks good," says Heckman. To address this UV4Me Version 2.0 includes several examples of how UV damage not only increases risk of cancer but will also have long-term consequences to the way your skin looks. "We included photos of sun damaged skin that isn't visible to the naked eye"

Finally, while Version 1 followed just under 1,000 participants for 12 weeks the updated program will recruit up to 1500 and look at their sun safety behavior changes for a full year after baseline. "Our thinking is that if we can keep people engaged for longer — using incentives and other strategies — we can help form healthy habits that may follow them throughout adulthood."

Tanning and Addiction

Heckman became interested in skin cancer prevention during her training where she came across a shocking article that examined tanning as a substance-related disorder.

"While this isn't an officially recognized condition, experts do believe that about 5% of college aged young women are addicted to tanning in much the same way we think of addiction to drugs or alcohol," says Heckman. "The parallels between the tanning industry and big tobacco are also really apparent — and it's what drew me into this area of study."

How You Can Get Involved with UV4Me

Heckman's work is addressing a critical unmet need among melanoma prevention programs. Here are two easy ways to get involved:

Participate: If you are a young adult interested in participating in the UV4Me Version 2.0 study, please go directly to the study's website at www.UV4Me.org to see if you are eligible.

Spread the word: Help connect friends, family, and your community to UV4Me via Facebook (@RUCancerPrevPopRes) and Twitter (@RUCancerPrevRes). For more information about the study, please reach out to ContactUV4me@gmail.com or 1-833-258-8463.

“Culture change is really hard — but that is what we need to work to do to shift the curve and reduce the incidence of new skin cancers including melanoma. Natural skin is beautiful skin — and I hope that UV4Me helps young adults to start realizing that,” says Heckman.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/uv4me-reaches-young-adults-sun-safety