

Health

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SKIN CANCER A THREAT TO THE YOUNG

A price too high

Tanning beds increase melanoma risk

By Susan Bloom :: For NJ Press Media

At 20, Allison Gough had everything going for her — good looks, lots of friends and a full, active life.

But in March, the Middletown resident and Brookdale Community College nursing student visited her dermatologist and learned that two of the three small, newly discovered moles on her stomach were precancerous, and one was a malignant melanoma — all, according to her doctor, the likely result of overexposure to ultraviolet light brought on by Gough's visits to tanning salons since the age of 14.

"My parents and I were shocked," Gough said.

Though her parents had not approved of her indoor tanning practices throughout her high school and college years, Gough and many of her friends went weekly in the fall, winter and spring, with Gough increasing to twice-weekly visits more recently.

"I would usually tan for six to 15 minutes at a time, depending on the level of the bed and the time of year," she said. "I just thought everybody always had to be tan. I'm of Irish, German and Polish descent, so I was always very pale. ... being tan just made me feel better about myself."

According to the American Cancer Society, more than 70,000 new cases of melanoma — the malignant tumor of melanocytes, or cells that produce the dark pigment responsible for the color of skin — will be diagnosed in 2011, with about 2,500 of these cases occurring in New Jersey.

"Malignant melanoma is the most lethal of all skin cancers, and in fact one of the deadliest of all cancers because it can spread to the brain, liver and lungs, and we currently don't have great drugs to treat it," said Dr. Arnold Baskies, a cancer surgeon at Virtua Memorial Hospital in Mount Holly and chairman of the board for the American Cancer Society of New York and New Jersey.

"If it spreads," he said, "it can truly be a death sentence."

Though it accounts for less than 5 percent of all skin cancer cases, melanoma is responsible for most skin cancer fatalities and is the leading cause of cancer deaths in patients 30 and younger, the

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For more information about skin cancer, the American Cancer Society can be reached at 800-227-2345 or www.cancer.org.



Alison Gough, 21, shows where a malignant melanoma was removed from her stomach. According to her doctor, her cancer was the result of weekly visits to tanning salons, which began when she was 14. THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

BACK PAIN SHORT-TERM SOLUTION

Study: Massage therapy beats meds

HealthDay

Massage therapy may be better than medication or exercise for easing low back pain in the short term, a new government-funded study suggests.

Seattle researchers recruited 401 patients, mostly middle-aged, female and white, all of whom had chronic low back pain.

Those who received a series of either relaxation massage or structural massage were better able to work and be active for up to a year than those getting "usual medical care," which included painkillers, anti-inflammatory drugs, muscle relaxants or physical therapy, the researchers found.

Lead study author Daniel Cherkin, director of Group Health Research Institute, said he had expected structural massage, which manipulates specific pain-related back muscles and ligaments, would prove superior to relaxation or so-called Swedish massage, which aims to promote a feeling of body-wide relaxation.

"I thought structural massage would have been at least a little better, and that's not the case," Cherkin said. "If you're having continuing problems with back pain even after trying usual medical care, massage may be a good thing to do. I think

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DANIEL CHERKIN,
lead study author



People's Pharmacy

By Joe Graedon
& Teresa Graedon

Does vitamin D cause heart attacks?

Q. I get a health newsletter from a respected medical center. I noticed in the last issue that vitamin D could raise the risk of heart attack and stroke by up to 20 percent. Any comments?

A. Several research reports have created considerable confusion. A year ago, researchers reported that people taking calcium supplements were 30 percent more likely to have a heart attack than those getting placebos (BMJ online, July 29, 2010). Although this finding came from a meta-analysis of 11 studies involving more than 12,000 people, many health professionals were skeptical and objected that vitamin D intake was not part of the analysis.

This year, a new study in BMJ (online, April 19, 2011) confirmed the original finding with a twist. Even women taking vitamin D with their calcium had a higher risk (20 percent) of heart attack or stroke compared with placebo. We suspect that this is what your newsletter was reporting.

More recent research shows that vitamin D alone appears to protect men from heart attacks and strokes (American Journal of Clinical Nutrition online, June 8, 2011). For more on the benefits and risks of vitamin D, you may wish to review our Guide to Vitamin D Deficiency. Anyone who would like a copy, please send \$3 in check or money order with a long (No. 10), stamped (64 cents), self-addressed envelope to: Graedon's People's Pharmacy, No. D-23, P.O. Box 52027, Durham, NC 27717-2027. It also can be downloaded for \$2 from our website: www.peoplespharmacy.com.

Excess calcium may be the culprit, while vitamin D may be neutral or protective for the heart.

Q. I am a 66-year-old retired physician who has taken simvastatin for the past two years. During this time, I noted a gradual decline in my erectile function.

My physician did not believe that simvastatin was the cause. After reading in The People's Pharmacy and elsewhere of a possible connection, I took myself off the drug.

Within three weeks, I had complete resolution of my problem. In addition, I have far fewer episodes of heartburn and musculoskeletal pain.

A. There is surprisingly little research on this topic. Although the official prescribing information for simvastatin (Zocor) mentions erectile dysfunction, many physicians have not heard about this link.

A study from France suggested that statins may cause or worsen erectile dysfunction (Drug Safety, July 2009). Italian researchers have reported that statins may reduce testosterone levels (Journal of Sexual Medicine, April 2010). This might explain your experience.

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