# A word of advice to young sun worshippers

*by Diana Rossetti*

Spring break is coming. So is prom. Tanning salons are gearing up for the herd of high school-age and college-age young people trying to color winter-pale skin with UVA and UVB rays obtained through daily sessions in tanning beds.

And, as surely as spring will give way to summer, medical experts are urging extreme caution, whether the rays they seek are natural or indoors.

CATCH RAYS WITH CAUTION - Life under the sun is much safer with sunblock. CNS Photo.

Plastic surgeons, such as Dr. Linda Camp of Canton, Ohio, are seeing the aftermath of too much tanning, much of it in tanning salons because Ohio's is not a tropical climate. The Mercy Medical Center surgeon has removed skin cancers from patients as young as 20, and it alarms her.

"There has been an increase in patients younger and younger," she said with obvious concern. "There are different wavelengths from sun and tanning beds.

UVB rays can damage the skin and can lead to skin cancer. Both UVB and UVA can come from fluorescent bulbs, but some places can tailor the bulb energy to lower the UVB."

SAFER WITH SUNBLOCK

Fair-skinned tanners are at higher risk for skin cancer, she stressed. But people with all skin types should wear sunblock as a precaution whether they are tanning or not.

"The skin is a vital organ and it needs to be protected. You can still be in the sun and still reap the benefit of good vitamin exchange. And you can get good color, but you must protect it with sunscreen," Camp stressed.

When a spot is precancerous, perhaps scaly, a dermatologist often can freeze it off the skin surface, but when the spot is large enough for a plastic surgeon to get involved, Camp said the incision must be made through the full thickness of the skin.

"We have to make sure we have adequate pathology margins and sometimes it can require more than one surgery," she commented. And don't take comfort in the excision of the cancer site being the end of the ordeal.

"Advanced squamous-cell cancer can metastasize. Basal-cell (cancer) very rarely would spread," she said. "I do see a lot of older people, a majority of folks in their late 50s and older, but with aggressive tanning bed use, they're getting younger and younger with problems."

## SEEING YOUNGER PATIENTS

"I've been doing this for 20 years," said Dr. Lizabeth Powers, whose dermatology office is in Jackson Township, Ohio. "And, statistically, yes, you can definitely see a connection between tanning parlor use and melanomas (skin cancer). I am removing skin cancers younger than before. And I'm also seeing more of the moles that are so wicked in their growth pattern. They are atypical and they're hard to call, but they are verging on melanoma. You are seeing them on young people, definitely, but we're catching them earlier, too."

Powers uses sunblock religiously, including during ski trips in the West where some people mistakenly believe that if the weather is cold enough to make snow, no sunblock is necessary.

Youngsters who pass through her office get her strongest advice about sun exposure. UVA rays, ones Powers calls the cancer promoters, are higher in tanning beds. UVB rays, she continued, tend to be cancer initiators. "I tell them that the first thing the sun will do is age skin. They won't notice it today, but in 20 years, it will be bad and it's too late to go back. But if they protect their skin, they will look better than all their friends. And then we do talk about skin cancer and that it can kill you. The rest is up to them. Unfortunately, most of us feel immortal and then we hit 40," she said.

## AT RISK

At Ohio State University Medical Center, Dr. Sara Peters is director of dermatopathology. She minces no words when it comes to those who worship the sun.

"I personally would think that having cancer-free skin is more important than having a tan. And kids don't realize it causes premature wrinkling, too," she said. "We have been, and are, studying it quite a lot. And there are people who have (genetic) risks for developing (skin) cancer. People need to give this serious thought."

*A word of advice to young sun worshippers by Diana Rossetti*