

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Trend alert: Tanning

“An increasingly online image-conscious society that continues to glamorize tan skin, misinformation spreading on social media and the addiction potential of tanning behaviour result in tanning behaviours being unfortunately still quite prevalent.”

– Dr. Tiffany Kwok, dermatologist

After almost two decades of widespread campaigns on skin cancer awareness and sun safety, safe sun practices have common knowledge. Despite this knowledge, the strength of a trend can seemingly overpower rationality when reinforced by social media misinformation and aesthetics.

The past few years have witnessed a resurgence of Y2K fashion, alongside a “maxxing” optimization culture. This means that as the summer season is upon us, buzzwords like “safe tanning,” “natural tanning” and “tanmaxxing” are emphasized by social media influencers while apps promote “safe” tanning techniques, tanning routines, tanning products and personalized notifications to optimize UV exposure.

Here is what the social media landscape looks like right now and how physicians can combat this misinformation with patients, family and friends.

Tanning salons reached a peak in the early 2000s when salons were considered amenities on college campuses and spread across malls and urban centres. Today, almost all tanning salons have shut down, and [only 3% of adults](#) tan indoors. The reduction in indoor tanning can be attributed to public health campaigns, age restrictions and heightened scientifically backed awareness of tanning's contribution to skin cancer, including a recent [2025 study](#) finding that indoor tanning beds triple the risk of melanoma.

Yet, regardless of awareness and evidence, [Gen Z is tanning](#). In the past year alone, 39% of Gen Z reported intentionally tanning, and 45% say tanning makes them feel more confident. Young people may not be in tanning beds, but they are interested in getting a tan ([25% of Gen Z say tanning is worth looking great now](#), even if it means looking worse later). Right now, [Spate data](#) show searches for “tanning” on Google, TikTok and Instagram are growing 30% year-over-year, and searches for tanning oil have grown over 50%. Tanning is appealing, trendy and a current signal of beauty and fitting in on social media.

We know tanning beds are bad, so it feels better to think you are participating in a “healthier” alternative, such as “tanning naturally” and “safe tanning”. Across social media, a quick search of tanning, tanning routine, natural tanning or safe tanning will

yield hundreds of picture-perfect videos of creators promoting their robust tanning routine:

- “I’ll sit out for at least the hours of 11-3.”
- “I use this oil for maximum tan.”
- “20 minutes front, 20 minutes back – swim break.”



25% of Gen Z say tanning is worth looking great now, even if it means looking worse later.

Statements like this are made while flaunting tan lines, providing tan inspiration and posting “get ready with me to tan” videos. Inspirations of “natural tanning” are constantly affirmed by more creators sharing their tans. If some users have the digital literacy to bypass the false narrative of tanning social media creators, the false “safe tan” narrative is reinforced elsewhere by smartphone apps who are cashing in on the trend.

The [Haloo app](#), marketed by the slogan “start tanning safely,” provides skin analysis, UV monitoring, safe tanning education, personalized timers with notifications and boasts providing users the ability to get their “dream glow without the burn”. The app provides limited information about who developed it or what expertise informed its recommendations. Users may find it difficult to assess the scientific basis of the advice being provided.

Other tanning apps include SunIQ, Beam Tanning – Get Tan Fast, Sunkiss Timer: AI tanning Routine” (yes, the app spells “tanning” wrong, confirmed at the time of writing), and as many as 50 others with a similar format (faceless, nameless, approachable branding and possibly generated mostly by AI). The apps provide users with UV tracking to “optimize” sun exposure, a personalized sun planning routine, skin analysis and mobile notifications that prompt users to go tan. These apps use engaging colours, branding and emojis to repackage tanning as something user-friendly, robust and seemingly credible.

How can we cut through the noise of social media to ensure sun safety can be trendy and front-of-mind this summer? Alberta Doctors’ Digest spoke with dermatologist Dr.

Tiffany Kwok about what this trend really means for skin health and how we can better understand and combat this misinformation.

Why aren't some people willing to stop tanning?

In the Western world, tanning has been seen as a status symbol associated with having the means to travel and spend leisure time outdoors. When the health benefits of UV exposure were discovered (e.g., UV exposure is known to help with Vitamin D synthesis), the tanning industry aggressively marketed its products, purportedly despite the known link to skin cancer and photoaging. These are amplified by an increasingly online image-conscious society that continues to glamorize tan skin, misinformation spreading on social media, and the addiction potential of tanning behaviours. As a result, tanning behaviours are unfortunately still quite prevalent.

Does the skincare industry profit from this?

Yes, but the skincare industry profits both ways: for every self-tanning/tanning oil/after sun product there is, there are also products for sun protection, skin lightening and wrinkle prevention that are just as, if not more profitable.

Is there such a thing as safe tanning?

While there is [some evidence](#) that UV exposure may decrease all-cause mortality in some studies, UV radiation is also classified by the World Health Organization as a Group 1 carcinogen and well-known to be a major risk factor for skin cancer. Systematic reviews of the evidence regarding the benefits of UV radiation at present do not suggest a change in current recommended sun protection behaviours.

Tanning is a response to UV-induced DNA damage, which can accumulate over time. Even if an individual is not getting a sunburn, the DNA damage from tanning their skin can have additive effects over time and can increase the risk of skin cancers in the long run.

Tanning bed usage (that emits over 10 times more UVA than outdoor sun exposure) has been associated with significantly increased risks of melanoma and squamous cell carcinoma. There is no such thing as a safe tan.

When it comes to apps that claim skin analysis, how reliable are they?

Apps that use AI to analyze a photo of your skin tone and use the UV index to try and extrapolate to a "safe" tanning regimen are dangerous. They can give patients a false sense of security with regard to UV exposure, as all tanning causes DNA damage.

People with similar skin tones can respond differently to UV radiation – some fair-skinned individuals are more likely to burn rather than tan (the Fitzpatrick phototype scale relies on both skin tone as well as propensity to tan vs burn) – so even if the main goal was to prevent burning, tanning potential based on skin tone alone is not an accurate measure.

How do you tell or inform someone of the risks of tanning when it is so intricately tied to trends and self-image?

If patients are image-conscious enough to want a tan, they should be image-conscious enough for the long-term after-effects of tanning, including wrinkles, solar lentigines and skin cancers. There is a [great photo](#) in the New England Journal of Medicine of a truck driver who had chronic sun exposure to the left side of the face, showing significant wrinkling and coarse texture of the face compared to the other side that wasn't exposed as regularly. Photos of facial skin cancer surgery with complex flaps needed for reconstruction can also be quite sobering for patients to see.

There is also a misconception that having a base tan before going on holiday can help prevent burning. This is false, as a base tan only provides sun protection equivalent to SPF 3-5, and it is recommended to use sun protective clothing or sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 or higher to unprotected areas.

Other dermatologist tips

- If patients wish to have a tan skin tone, the use of self-tanner or getting a spray tan is much safer than UV exposure in terms of skin health.
- Dermatologist-recommended sun protection behaviours include minimizing sun exposure during peak UV intensity (especially between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.), seeking shade when possible, wearing sun-protective clothing such as a wide-brimmed hat and sun-protective clothing (ideally UPF 50+), and applying broad-spectrum SPF 30+ sunscreen to exposed skin, reapplying every two hours and after swimming or profuse sweating.

Banner image credit: Natalie LaBuick