Online Misinformation Puts Over 16 Million Americans at Higher Risk for Skin Cancer

Gen Z earns an F in sun safety quiz from the American Academy of Dermatology, which stresses: “There is no such thing as a safe tan.”

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Every year, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) conducts a survey to monitor sun safety habits in the United States. This year’s Practice Safe Sun Survey revealed the role of misinformation in driving risky sun behaviors, especially among Gen Zers (people ages 18 to 29). More than 16 million Americans reported reducing or stopping sunscreen use because of online claims. For Skin Cancer Awareness Month (May), AAD encourages safe sun practices, such as applying sunscreen, seeking shade and wearing sun-protective clothing.

“Data show that many Americans are learning about long-term sun damage the hard way,” said AAD president and dermatologist, Murad Alam, MD, MBA. “The effects of UV exposure build over time, driving premature aging and increasing the risk of skin cancer, which is now the most common form of cancer in the United States. The good news is that much of this damage is preventable with simple, consistent sun protection habits.”

One in five Americans will develop skin cancer in their lifetime, and about 9,500 people in the United States are diagnosed with the malignancy every day, according to AAD. The primary risk factor for skin cancer is exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or tanning beds. Avoiding the sun, using sunscreen and wearing clothes that cover the skin can reduce the risk of developing skin cancer.

To learn more about skin cancer, read Cancer Health’s Skin Cancer Basics.

AAD administered a sun safety quiz as part of its survey to assess participants’ knowledge related to sun protection. Nearly half of Americans scored a C or lower despite 67% rating their own sun habits as “good” or “excellent. Among Gen Z participants, one third received D or F grade.

In the survey, one third of Americans reported having experienced a sunburn in the last year, and 57% of Americans reported regularly using sunscreen.

Online misinformation was the key driver of sun safety decision-making, especially among younger audiences. Overall, 21% of Americans rely on Instagram or TikTok influencers for skin care advice, while 36% of Gen Zers identify social media influencers as their primary source of skin care information. Nearly half of all Americans and 64% of Gen Zers reported encountering sunscreen misinformation online.

“While it’s encouraging that over half of Americans are using sunscreen, young people and adults are navigating an overwhelming amount of conflicting information about sun protection,” said Alam. “Misinformation reinforces harmful tanning myths, leading people to underestimate the risks of UV light exposure and ignore protective measures. It’s important to evaluate the source of medical information and make informed skin care decisions by seeking advice from a board-certified dermatologist. The reality is that window glass cannot stop harmful rays, and no amount of sun exposure is necessary or completely safe.”

One of the most persistent myths about sun exposure is that a tan is harmless. In reality, any tan is a sign of UV damage, which can increase skin cancer risk or accelerate aging. Over 160 million American adults got a suntan in 2025 and nearly 60 million did so intentionally. Of all adults, 83% said sun exposure gave them a “healthy-looking glow,” and 55% believed tanned skin looks healthier. Nearly a third (29%) of adults believed the myth that tanning is safe if you don’t burn, and nearly a fifth (19%) believed that a base tan can prevent sunburn or reduce cancer risk.

“There is no such thing as a safe tan. Every time you tan or burn, you are also damaging the DNA in your skin and the more damage, the greater your risk of skin cancer,” said Alam. “There is a disconnect driving high rates of sunburn, with consequences that go far beyond just temporary discomfort. Sunburns cause pain and embarrassment in the short term, and over time, they make the skin look wrinkled, spotted and old, while also dramatically increasing the risk of skin cancer.”

Many adults worry about long-term skin health; indeed, 70% wish they had done more to protect their skin earlier in life, 50% worry about premature skin aging and 43% already see skin damage, like wrinkles or dark spots. Yet 21% of adults were unaware that sunscreen helps prevent premature aging and 26% did not realize it could help prevent dark spots.

To read more on this topic in Cancer Health, click #Skin Cancer and #Sun Protection, where you will find stories such as:

- “A Life-Changing Diagnosis: Leah Koskinen’s Melanoma Journey,”
- “Indoor Tanning Makes Youthful Skin Much Older on a Genetic Level,”
- “Highlighting Patient Voices in Rare Melanoma Research,”
- “Study Finds Melanoma Less Common in Individuals With Several Tattoos” and
- “UV Camera Shows Importance of Sun Safety.”

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