

Melanoma / Skin Cancer Detection and Prevention Month



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SKIN CANCER SURVIVORS JOIN DERMATOLOGISTS TO EDUCATE TEENS ABOUT RISKS OF INDOOR TANNING

SCHAUMBURG, ILL. (May 7, 2007) – Prior to their diagnoses of melanoma, Meghan Rothschild and Lexi Lewis were two of the estimated 2 to 3 million teens that use indoor tanning beds. In spite of repeated health warnings issued in the media about the risks of indoor tanning, neither was prepared to find out that she had melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

Meghan Rothschild was only 20 years old when she was diagnosed with Stage II melanoma. “I wasn’t a sun worshipper,” says Meghan. “I had maybe two sunburns in my life before I was diagnosed with melanoma.” Meghan believes her “innocent” weekly visits to the tanning beds caused her cancer. “I’m a pale, redhead who had never had a tan,” she says. “But when I was 17 years old, I got a tan from a tanning bed and loved the way I looked with it. So I started going to the tanning bed once a week for 20 minutes each time.”

In her sophomore year at college, Meghan noticed a black mole on her stomach that itched. She had it removed by a surgeon and did not think twice about it. When she went

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back to have her stitches removed, her doctor gave her the potentially deadly diagnosis: melanoma. “I was devastated,” said Meghan. “I didn’t even fully understand what melanoma meant or how it could be treated.”

Her doctor discovered Meghan’s melanoma had spread; she required a three-hour surgery to remove eight lymph nodes from under her arms. She had more than 70 stitches in her body and a 5-inch scar on her stomach. “One of the worst things was having drainage tubes sewn into my scars for several days,” recalls Meghan. While she has had more than 20 surgeries since then, she remains cancer-free today.

“The year following my surgery I was so depressed and mad at myself,” explains Meghan. “I couldn’t believe that my own lifestyle choices had given me cancer. I just kept thinking ‘I gave myself cancer.’”

Meghan has since taken that frustration and turned it into something positive. She volunteers to share her experience with high schools, local community organizations, and anyone else who will listen. Meghan hopes her brush with death will be a wake-up call for others, particularly young people. “I hope no one has to go through what I have, especially because it’s avoidable,” she said.

Lexi Lewis was only 18 when she received the devastating news that she had melanoma. Fortunately for her, it was caught early when most forms of skin cancer are highly treatable. Though caught early, Lexi’s treatment still meant having a surgery that left a 2-inch scar on her arm. Lexi recalls that it all started because she began visiting an indoor tanning salon to look tan for her junior prom.

“I asked the salon workers what I needed to do to build a tan for prom and they told me to go at least three to four times a week,” said Lexi. “So that’s what I did. And sometimes, I’d even go five times a week for up to 20 minutes each time.”

After her junior prom, Lexi tanned again for her senior pictures. Early in her senior year, her mother noticed a suspicious mole on Lexi’s arm. When they visited a dermatologist to get it checked, they were told that it did not look good, but at Lexi’s young age of 18, none of them, not even her doctor, expected the diagnosis to come back as skin cancer.

“I was terrified when we found out it was cancer,” said Lexi. “I’d heard about all the risks of indoor tanning, but you just don’t think it will happen to you. Here I was, a senior in high school, and my dermatologist was talking to me about survival rates. It was devastating.”

Lexi explains that her parents were extremely emotional over the diagnosis. “They blamed themselves,” she said. “They couldn’t believe they let me do something that could potentially kill me.”

In February, Lexi accompanied her dermatologist to the South Dakota legislature to testify on behalf of a law that would ban young people under the age of 18 from using tanning beds. Lexi made her plea to the state’s Senate Health and Human Services Committee, “You want to look good for senior prom and senior pictures, and you don’t think something bad might happen.”

Unfortunately, the state legislature did not pass the bill, but Lexi is not giving up. “Teens don’t realize the consequences of some of their actions,” she said. “The effects of other harmful behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, may not show up until 30 or 40 years later – but melanoma can show up so fast. I’m living proof.”

Both Lexi and Meghan admit that while they had heard about indoor tanning risks, they believed the benefits outweighed the risks. They are not alone. In fact, a new national survey by the Academy revealed that 67 percent of the respondents incorrectly believe tanning beds are safer than the sun.

New research continues to surface about the risks of indoor tanning. A report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer states that a review of seven studies found a statistically significant 75 percent increase in the risk of melanoma in those who had exposure to tanning beds before the age of 35. Additionally, a Swedish study presents strong evidence that indoor tanning increases the risk of melanoma, especially when indoor tanning begins at an early age.

“Unfortunately, we are discovering more and more young women who are living proof of such research,” said Arielle N.B. Kauvar, MD, FAAD, New York City-based dermatologist and chair of the Academy’s Council on Communications. “This year more than 1 million new cases

of skin cancer will be diagnosed in the U.S. It is possible that many of these cases may be prevented, but to do so, teens and their parents need to take action.”

To help educate teenagers, the American Academy of Dermatology (Academy) launched a public service advertisement (PSA) campaign that focuses on the facts about indoor tanning risks. The campaign speaks to teens in a language they understand – instant messaging.

“This campaign is an aggressive attempt by the Academy to target teenage girls before they start tanning and teach them about this unnecessary health risk,” said Dr. Kauvar. “Melanoma is now the second most common cancer in women aged 20-29. Through this PSA campaign, the Academy hopes to reduce statistics like these and prevent more young women from going through what Meghan and Lexi have experienced.”

The PSA campaign consists of television, radio, print and Internet advertisements that highlight the risks of skin cancer and skin damage that indoor tanning can cause. It was distributed throughout the country in November 2006. For more information about the campaign or to view the ads, visit www.aad.org/skincancerpsas.

May 7 is Melanoma Monday[®] and the official launch of Melanoma/Skin Cancer Detection and Prevention Month[®]. For more information about skin cancer, please visit www.skincarephysicians.com and click on “SkinCancerNet.”

The American Academy of Dermatology (Academy), founded in 1938, is the largest, most influential, and most representative of all dermatologic associations. With a membership of more than 15,000 physicians worldwide, the Academy is committed to: advancing the diagnosis and medical, surgical and cosmetic treatment of the skin, hair and nails; advocating high standards in clinical practice, education, and research in dermatology; and supporting and enhancing patient care for a lifetime of healthier skin, hair and nails. For more information, contact the Academy at 1-888-462-DERM (3376) or www.aad.org.

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