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BRONZED IS BEAUTIFUL, UM STUDENTS SAY

MISSOULA—

All but impervious to evidence that suntan can result in disfigurement and even death from skin cancer, students at The University of Montana—Missoula still go for the bronzed look, a recent UM study found.

The study, which involved 91 students, aimed to change attitudes about suntanning through persuasive communication -- a 15-minute video on the risks of sun exposure. Study results showed those attitudes hard to budge.

Subjects -- 43 males, 48 females -- were randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. Both groups watched 48 pairs of slides from an Australian study showing two models -- some male, some female -- in varying degrees of suntan, one model always lighter in color than the other. Students were asked to judge which model looked more attractive and which looked healthier.

Students in the experimental group, however, also watched the video before viewing the slides. The video featured interviews with three people who were living testimonials to the damaging effects of sun exposure: One had photoaging, which causes the "dried prune" look; two had had skin cancer.

"Our hypothesis," said Lori Armstrong, the UM psychology graduate student in charge of the study, "was that the experimental group would view lighter levels of tan to be both healthier and more attractive."

What the study found, she said, was that while students in the experimental group viewed - more -
the lighter tan as healthier looking, they chose the darker tan as more attractive. Students in the control group chose the darker tan as both healthier looking and more attractive.

"We changed attitudes about healthiness," Armstrong said. "We didn’t change attitudes about attractiveness."

Why not? Armstrong, a reformed sunbather herself, speculated that perhaps the video wasn’t persuasive enough, particularly in light of our culture’s entrenched attitudes about suntan and all it connotes: leisure, glamour, sexiness, athleticism and glowing health. French designer Coco Chanel may be at least partly to blame for those attitudes, Armstrong said. Chanel in 1929 told Vogue magazine that "a golden tan is the index of chic."

But "these attitudes are the antithesis of past norms," Armstrong said, so it may be possible to change them. Before the Industrial Revolution, she said, "a suntan was a byproduct of manual outdoor labor and perceived as a sign of the working class. When those same people began to work inside factories, the trend was reversed. A tan became the symbol of wealth and leisure while paleness was associated with labor."

Since the link between sun exposure and skin cancer is irrefutable, Armstrong said it’s important to change cultural attitudes. But, even so, she said, how well changed attitudes translate into changed behaviors needs further research.

"Judging from the ever-increasing rate of skin cancer," she said, "this research cannot be undertaken too soon."

Armstrong is working on a doctorate in psychology at UM. Psychology Professor Balfour Jeffrey mentored her work on the suntan study.

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SIDEBAR TO SUNTAN STORY

MISSOULA—

The UM study on changing attitudes about suntans also found that

■ Female subjects in the experimental group thought darker male models looked healthier.

■ Both the experimental and control groups judged male models with a darker tan to look healthier and more attractive in general and healthier and more attractive than darker-tanned female models.

■ Both groups gave models with darker tans in bathing suits higher ratings on healthiness and attractiveness than they gave models in casual wear.

■ Mean scores for tan preference were lower for the UM subjects than for the Australian subjects on whom the 48 pairs of slides were first used, which indicates that Australians consider darker tans to look healthier and more attractive than North Americans do.

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