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[News / Archive](#)
[Weather](#)
[Sports](#)
[Election 2004](#)
[Investigators](#)
[Call For Action](#)
[Dirty Dining](#)
[Hall of Shame](#)
[Health](#)
[Community](#)
[Personalities](#)
[Segments](#)
[Links & Info](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Live Cams](#)
[Contests](#)
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[Search](#)

Toxicologists' concern: are spray-on tanning booths safe?

an ABC Action News report 5/13/04

TAMPA - It's the hottest craze in tanning without the sun's harmful rays: step into a sunless tanning booth, the spray nozzles kick on, and less than a minute later you step out, tan.

That promise was enough to lure in Sasha Talsky, who doesn't have time to lie out in the sun. But when she gagged on the haze of chemicals in the booth, she started to worry.

"I tried not to think about what was in it that I was breathing into my lungs," she explained.



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The product Sasha was breathing is dihydroxyacetone, known as DHA. It's what changes your skin color, and is found in tanning creams and all of those spray tanning products.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved DHA as a topical cream, but the spray form has not been tested or approved.

There's reason for concern, toxicologists say, because DHA contains some harmful chemicals.

"Lead, arsenic, mercury, and things like that," Dr. Thomas Pierce explained.

The FDA actually warns people on its Web site to keep the spray away from their eyes, nose, lips and other mucus membranes. The head of the color and cosmetics branch of the FDA claims it's for good reason.

"DHA is safe as color when used externally, but we do not know about its safety in regard to being used in the misted situation," stated Dr. Linda Katz of the FDA.

So, are salons offering their clients any protection? Action News decided to go undercover to find out.

When our cameras went into the Raydiance Tanning Center in Hyde Park, we were told we didn't need to take any safety precautions. So reporter Laura McElroy went back to talk with the owner.



"Should there be some precautions taken to protect the people?" Laura asked salon owner Sandra Rossiter.

"That's why we offer nose plugs for people who want to wear nose plugs," Rossiter replied. "We just got them in recently. They're a newer item."

In addition to the nose plugs, it's also suggested customers use a lip balm, keep their mouth shut, and hold their breath when in the booth.

Our investigators found it was easier to hold your breath in the salons that only spray for 12 seconds, like the Tanning Palace in Carrollwood and St. Petersburg.

The salon didn't offer any protective gear, but it did warn that the FDA has concerns about the spray tan.

"We certainly don't want to inhale something into the lungs of any type. It's something we want to prevent, if at all possible. So we recommend closing the eyes and closing mouth just so you don't have the taste of DHA," the manager explained.

Sasha didn't get that advice until after her spray session at another salon, which is making her confidence fade like her tan.

"You're paying \$25 a session and they don't give you a nose plug. They don't tell you what's in it," she continued. "It scares me, I don't think I'll ever do it again."

The manufacturer of the tanning booths has sent out videotapes for the salons to play for their customers. The tape tells people how to protect themselves, but none of the salons that we went to with our undercover cameras played the tape for us.

The Raydiance Tanning Center says it is now playing the tape for its customers.

The bottom line is that the potential dangers with the spray are unknown. The FDA hasn't tested the product in the new form, so we don't know what effects, if any, this may have on someone over the long run.

The FDA says it will only do the testing if a manufacturer requests it. In the meantime, it will continue to put out a warning.



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