

Sunless Tanners

This sheet is about exposure to sunless tanners in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available published literature. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What are sunless tanners?

Sunless tanners are cosmetics, like creams and lotions that are placed on the skin to darken it, making the skin look “tan” without sun exposure. They are sometimes also referred to as self-tanners. The common active ingredient in sunless tanners is called dihydroxyacetone (DHA). (Not to be confused with the other DHA, docosahexaenoic acid, an omega-3 fatty acid found in some foods and dietary supplements.) Dihydroxyacetone DHA often comes from plant sources such as sugar beets and sugar cane.

Sunless tanning products without added sunscreen do not protect skin from the harmful effects of the sun. Therefore, sunscreen and protective clothing are recommended to shield yourself from the sun if using sunless tanners.

Sunless tanners are cosmetics. How are cosmetics checked for safety in the United States?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not check cosmetic products for safety and effectiveness in the same way that medication is regulated. Companies or people who manufacture or market cosmetics have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their products, but the FDA does not require specific safety testing. There is also no requirement to do testing for use during pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This means there is typically no medical data to help with choosing among brands or types of cosmetics during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

However, coloring additives, like DHA, are required to be approved by the FDA. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved DHA as a tanning product in the United States in the 1970’s. The approval is not specific to pregnancy or breastfeeding. DHA is approved for use on the outside of the body. It is not approved for use near the eyes or on the lips and not approved for breathing in the fumes. This is because there is no safety data for DHA with use near these mucus membranes or with inhaling DHA.

Are sunless tanners absorbed into my bloodstream if I am using them on my skin?

When DHA is placed on the skin, laboratory models suggest there is very poor absorption of DHA into the bloodstream (less than 1%). Therefore, only very small amounts of DHA should be able to reach the pregnancy.

Most over-the-counter sunless tanners contain 3-5% DHA but products marketed for a darker tan and products for professional use could have a higher concentration. The FDA approval for DHA placed on the skin is for concentrations up to 15%.

There are no studies that estimate the absorption of other ingredients that may also be found in sunless tanners. Other ingredients could include moisturizers, bronzers, fragrances, vitamins, and preservatives. Absorption of these ingredients in skin products may be less when used on healthy skin, used infrequently, or used on small areas of the body.

What about using booths, which spray sunless tanner on me?

It is possible that if you are inhaling the sunless tanning spray fumes in tanning booths, or applying the product to mucous membranes, more of the DHA could get into your system and result in higher blood levels.

The FDA has not approved DHA use as an all-over spray. Avoid using it near body openings or mucous membranes (such as eyes, eyelids, mouth, lips, nose or ears). This may be hard to avoid when using a “spray tanning” booth. The FDA recommends any person using these booths ask for protective measures to cover your eyes, mouth and nose.

I use sunless tanners. Can they make it harder for me to get pregnant?

It is not known if sunless tanners can make it harder to get pregnant since this has not been studied.

Does using sunless tanners increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Studies have not been done to see

if sunless tanners increase the chance for miscarriage.

Does using sunless tanners increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners increase the chance of birth defects.

Does using sunless tanners in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners increase the chance for pregnancy-related problems such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth).

Does using sunless tanners in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners can cause behavior or learning issues for the child.

Breastfeeding while using sunless tanners:

There are no studies on the use of sunless tanners during breastfeeding. Only small amounts of DHA applied to the skin are expected to be able to reach breastmilk. Absorption may be further decreased when the product is used on healthy skin, used infrequently, or used on small areas of the body only. If you use these products while breastfeeding, make sure that the product is not placed on the breast area or in any area that may come in contact with your baby's skin before the product has dried. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

If a male uses sunless tanners, could it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners could affect male fertility (ability to get partner pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects above the background risk. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Please click here for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://mothertobaby.org).

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