Sunless Tanners

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

What are sunless tanners?

Sunless tanners, also called self-tanners, are often creams or lotions that darken your skin to give it a "tan" without sun exposure. The main ingredient is dihydroxyacetone (DHA), usually made from plants like sugar beets or sugar cane. (This DHA is different from the omega-3 fatty acid with the same abbreviation.)

Tanning pills (taken by mouth) are considered unsafe according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Some tanning pills have a color additive called canthaxanthin. Taking too much can turn your skin orange or brown and can also cause serious health problems, like liver damage, hives, and an eye condition that affects your retinas. Tanning shots (injections under the skin) are not legally available in the United States.

Sunless tanners do not protect your skin from the sun, so it is important to use sunscreen or protective clothing when outdoors.

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

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not review cosmetics for safety and effectiveness the same way it does medications. Companies that make or sell cosmetics are responsible for making sure their products are safe, but the FDA does not require specific safety testing. There is also no requirement to test cosmetic products for use during pregnancy or breastfeeding. Because of this, there is usually little medical information to help women choose between cosmetic products during pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

However, color additives such as DHA must be approved by the FDA. The FDA approved DHA as a tanning ingredient in the United States in the 1970s. This approval does not specifically address use during pregnancy or breastfeeding. DHA is approved only for use on the outside of the body. It is not approved for use near the eyes or lips, or for inhalation, because there is not enough safety data for these types of exposure.

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

When medication is taken by mouth or swallowing, it is likely to get into the blood, where it can then possibly cross the placenta and reach the developing fetus. With most topical products, the skin serves as a good barrier, so it is not expected that a large amount of the product would get into the blood. This is especially true when the topical product is used on small areas of the body, infrequently, or on healthy (non-broken) skin.

Laboratory models suggest when DHA is placed on the skin, less than 1% of DHA is absorbed into the bloodstream. That means, only very small amounts, if any, of DHA are expected to be able to reach the fetus.

Most over-the-counter sunless tanning products contain 3–5% DHA, although products marketed for a darker tan or for professional use may contain higher concentrations. The FDA has approved DHA for external use at concentrations up to 15%.

There are no studies measuring how much of the other ingredients in sunless tanners are absorbed through the skin. These products may also contain moisturizers, bronzers, fragrances, vitamins, and preservatives. In general, absorption of ingredients from skin products is likely to be lower when applied to healthy skin, used infrequently, or applied to 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 the use of DHA in tanning booths. 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 that any person using these booths asks for protective measures to cover the eyes, mouth and

nose.

I use sunless tanners. Can they make it harder for me to get pregnant?
Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners can make it harder to get pregnant.

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 can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does using sunless tanners increase the chance of birth defects?
Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like sunless tanners, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy. Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners can 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 can increase the chance of 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 increase the chance of 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 very small amounts of DHA applied to the skin are expected to enter the bloodstream and pass into breast milk. Absorption is likely even lower when the product is used on healthy skin, applied infrequently, or used on small areas of the body.

If using these products while breastfeeding, avoid applying them to the breast or any area that could come into direct contact with your baby’s skin before the product has completely dried. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man uses sunless tanners, could it affect his fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?
Studies have not been done to see if sunless tanners could affect male fertility (ability to make healthy sperm) or increase the chance of birth defects. 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.

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