Ban on Teen Tanning Proposed

By Jessica Gresko
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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Miss Florida Teen USA Kayla Collier was 15 when she first visited a tanning salon so the stage lights at a local pageant wouldn't make her fair skin look ghostly white.

Later that year, as she tried on homecoming dresses, her mother noticed what looked like a scab on her back. It turned out to be skin cancer.

And though she can't definitively link the tanning to the cancer, Collier, now 18 and healthy, won't be back under the bulbs. On Wednesday, her voice catching, she asked Sunshine State lawmakers to ban people under 16 from using tanning beds.

"I know teenagers that go every day, every week, twice a day sometimes to tanning beds," said Collier, who wore her sash and a sunshine yellow jacket. "I do believe that it did play a part in my skin cancer."

Florida is among 17 states, including Hawaii, considering laws this year that would restrict indoor tanning by minors. Proposals would ban teens from tanning salons or require them to get notes from parents or doctors.

After the Florida bill passed a Senate committee, Collier's mother, Claire, who had signed the permission form that allowed her daughter to tan, said she hopes the full Legislature will approve it.

"Do you really realize that your daughter or son - after just a few times in the tanning bed - could have melanoma? I didn't," she said.

Opponents say the tanning beds are safe for teens and their use should be up to parents, not states.

"I gotta tell you, you cannot regulate everything in this world," said Florida Sen. Mike Bennett, a Republican who voted against the bill. "I suppose we could say the same thing and outlaw tanning on the beach."

Persuading teens to stop tanning could be a hard sell. According to one study released in 2002, a quarter of those ages 15 to 18 had used indoor tanning in the past year.

Florida already requires parental approval before minors can use tanning salons. If the new law passes, it would be among the strictest in the nation. Only one state, Wisconsin, bans teens 16 and under from using tanning beds, though a handful of others - California, New York and New Jersey among them - ban the under-14 crowd. At least 29 states have some regulations governing tanning by minors.

Even more restrictive proposals in Texas would prohibit anyone under 18 from using a tanning bed without a doctor's note.

Texas state Rep. Burt Solomons, a Republican, says it makes sense to ban minors from tanning just like they're prohibited from buying cigarettes because both are known carcinogens. And Democratic Vermont state Rep. Janet Ancel, who introduced her bill after having skin cancer herself, said just requiring parental consent isn't good enough.

"It isn't healthy for a young person to be in a tanning booth, so allowing it with a parent's consent isn't going to protect them," she said.

Many of the bills being debated in state legislatures this year were promoted by California-based Aim at Melanoma, which supports research and education on the most serious form of skin cancer.

More than a million people are diagnosed with some form of skin cancer every year, and experts say overexposure to ultraviolet radiation early in life can increase the risk of getting cancer later.

The bill's main opponents have been salon owners and the Washington-based Indoor Tanning Association, which promotes the $5 billion industry in the U.S. and represents some 20,000 tanning salons.