

Canadian magazines miss the mark on skin cancer messages

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Canadian magazines are sending women mixed messages about skin cancer and tanning, according to new University of Waterloo research.

The study, published in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* and funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, found that magazines promote a tanned look and provide women with limited information on risk factors and [early detection](#) for skin cancer.

"Messages surrounding skin cancer in Canadian women's magazines are conflicting and there are important gaps," said Professor Jennifer McWhirter, who conducted the study for her doctoral dissertation in the School of Public Health and Health Systems at Waterloo. "This is problematic because the mass media is an important source of health information for people."

The study looked at coverage of skin cancer and [tanning](#) in six popular women's magazines from 2000 to 2012: Canadian Living, Chatelaine, Homemakers, FASHION, ELLE Canada, and Flare. The authors examined 154 articles, and images that went along with them, for information about prevention, [risk factors](#), and early detection.

While 70 per cent of articles promoted sunscreen use, very few encouraged other ways to prevent skin cancer, such as wearing protective clothing and a hat, seeking shade, and avoiding the sun and indoor tanning. Only a very small minority of articles discouraged indoor tanning.

Of the images, more than half promoted the tanned look as attractive. "The blonde, bronzed young woman in a bikini is pretty intense competition for the accompanying [public health](#) message to protect against UV exposure," said Professor McWhirter. "My co-author and I were surprised and concerned that there was so little information in the Canadian magazines on the

dangers of tanning beds."

The World Health Organization classifies UV-exposure from the devices as carcinogenic. Despite the risks, it is estimated that more than one-quarter of Canadian young women use indoor tanning beds. There are many more tanning salons in Canada than there are Tim Hortons or McDonald's restaurants.

Information about how to catch the disease early was virtually absent in the magazines studied.

"We found there was a clear lack of content about early detection for [skin cancer](#)," said Professor Laurie Hoffman-Goetz, of the School of Public Health and Health Systems, who supervised the study. "When it's caught early, it's more likely to be curable. But people need to know what to look for and when to seek medical attention."

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer among Canadians, with approximately 6,500 new cases of melanoma and 76,100 cases of non-melanoma diagnosed each year. Related healthcare costs are estimated to reach \$922 million per year by 2031.

More information:

journal.cpha.ca/index.php/cjph/article/view/4795

Provided by University of Waterloo

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