

OPINION//OPEN FORUM

Gen Z doesn't think sunscreen is important. I didn't either at their age. Now I'm paying the price

By Kim Ratcliff | Aug 10, 2024



Kim Ratcliff soaks in the sun at age 17 in 1981 at Waimea Bay, Hawaii. At 60, and diagnosed with advanced skin cancer, she has to cover up on a visit to Kailua, Hawaii, in July. Courtesy of Kim Ratcliff

I grew up in the late '70s and '80s in California tanning by the pool, positioning my chaise lounge to catch maximum rays and intent on caramelizing my fair skin into a dark hue that made me feel hip and sexy.

Four decades later, I'm paying the price: In January, I was diagnosed with Stage 3 metastatic malignant melanoma — advanced skin cancer that spread to one of my lymph nodes.

Like many people of my generation, I grew up believing catching rays was good for you. The only sun damage I worried about was the occasional burn blisters I got from slathering on too much baby oil. A hallmark of teenagers is a blissful ability to live in the now, to feel invincible. But this attitude is centered on a lack of life experience, of information — and sometimes on a deliberate choice to ignore the data points in front of you.

Sunscreen with SPF15 wasn't introduced until 1986; SPF30 sunscreen didn't hit the market until the early '90s. Today GenZ and their younger sisters have information connecting sun exposure and skin cancer at their fingertips — yet many are choosing not to believe it.

On TikTok, the phrase "Sunscreen is Bad for You" is trending, with dozens of creators claiming that sunscreen causes cancer, acne, vitamin D deficiency and hormonal imbalances. Many are using the Ultraviolet Index app, which provides a daily forecast of expected UV radiation on a 1-11+ scale — so consumers can avoid harmful rays — to plan their tanning activities. Under #tanning, dozens of young women and girls swap tips and misinformation.

I was gobsmacked when I found a video of Maya — still in braces, chewing gum and wearing a pink tube top that showed off her blindingly white bikini lines against her sun-kissed skin.

"Deciding to put Baby Oil on my face while tanning every day," she captioned the video.

"THOSE TAN LINES," remarked one commenter.

"Wear sunscreen," another advised.

"No," Maya flatly replied.

The video has racked up 2.7 million views.

In recent weeks, dermatologists and scientists have been sounding alarms on this pro-sun, anti-sunscreen sentiment. Melanoma is the second most common type of cancer diagnosed in 15-to-19-year-olds, yet a recent American Academy of Dermatology survey revealed that 28% of Gen Zers reported that getting a tan is more important to them than preventing skin cancer.

I'm too familiar with this attitude: I was once Maya. On the beach in Santa Cruz, I fried my face with baby oil until it turned pink and puffy. At night I popped the blisters, peeled away dead skin and headed back out the next day — the blisters a mere annoyance before my skin turned a chestnut brown with butternut squash undertones.

Tanning was a culture. A social event. Friends glistened together, lying on parallel towels. Rod Stewart rasped "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?" on my Walkman. I thought, *Hell yeah, I'm sexy*. I didn't play sports, but I was on the Varsity Tanning Squad. My trophy was the amount of contrast between my lily-white butt and my Coppertone thighs.

It was nothing short of miraculous, the way we transformed our bodies in just a few short hours. One friend rubbed her skin with Blue Bonnet margarine, believing it gave her the best hue. At the end of the afternoon, we'd compete, comparing tan lines to see who was darker.

Like today's teens, we lived in the now. I thought in minutes, not in decades. I felt invincible, especially after an eight-hour beach bake-a-thon, when my serotonin rocketed through the sunroof of my VW bug.

It wasn't until I reached my 30s, in the mid-'90s, that I gave up tanning. Its popularity had weakened as the public became more aware of the link between UV radiation and melanoma.

But by then it was too late. Years of sun exposure had damaged my DNA, producing mutations that led to skin cancer.

I was 46 when my physician husband noticed a suspicious chocolate chip-sized spot on the back of my right thigh. My dermatologist told me it was stage zero malignant melanoma and excised the lesion right in her treatment room. I left her office feeling as though I'd dodged a bullet.

I followed her instructions religiously, using SPF 50, seeking shade between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., wearing rash guards and hats to block the sun when I surfed with my family, and never missing a yearly full-body skin exam.

I thought I was safe. Then, in December, three months before I turned 60, I was showering when I felt a pea-sized lump in my right groin. A biopsy confirmed that it was malignant melanoma. The oncologist explained that a rogue cell had spent 14 years traveling from the original site — the back of my thigh — to my lymph node. Once cancer infiltrates a lymph node, the stage ratchets up to 3: I have Stage 3 malignant metastatic melanoma.

In her TikTok post, Maya wrote "love getting skin cancer." Trust me, Maya, there's nothing to love. This is what #gettingskincancer looks like: It's terrifying knowing that I might die. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, once a melanoma has metastasized, "the five-year survival rate plummets to 62%."

I endured a grueling surgery to remove eight lymph nodes. (Luckily, cancer was only detected in one.) My thigh ballooned to almost double its normal size for eight weeks, which wasn't very sexy. Traditional chemotherapy and radiation don't work on melanoma, so my oncologist prescribed me a cocktail of five pills a day that make me vomit and get violent chills. My thigh bears a scar from a drain incision that resembles a bullet hole and another jagged 3-inch scar juts out from my bikini bottoms.

These days, instead of lying poolside, I'm lying in PET scan machines to make sure my body hasn't produced any new tumors.

I think back to the invincible teenager I once was, doing something that made me feel prettier, clueless that the UV rays were slowly and dangerously altering my genes. Back then 60 sounded ancient. Today, it seems far too young to be contemplating my own mortality.

But it takes growing up to realize youth — and good health — don't last forever.

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