

Crackdown on illegal underage sunbed use to cut teen cancer risk

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The government plans to crack down on illegal underage sunbed use to cut cancer risks to teenagers.

- Unsupervised sunbed use by young people to be banned as part of National Cancer Plan
- Consultation to launch in spring 2026, new rules could come into force as soon as 2027
- Drive to tackle avoidable cancer and help make the NHS fit for the future

More young people will be better protected from skin cancer through a proposed crackdown on sunbed harms, clamping down on rogue businesses flouting the law and putting children's health at risk by selling sessions to under 18s.

New proposals under the soon-to-be launched National Cancer Plan will strengthen requirements around commercial sunbed use, including banning unsupervised sessions and introducing mandatory ID checks to verify users are over 18.

Recent investigations have shown that teenagers as young as 14 are gaining access to tanning salons, routinely flouting the existing ban on under 18s using sunbeds. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified UV-emitting devices, such as sunbeds, a Group 1 carcinogen. This is the same category as other cancer-causing hazards such as tobacco smoking, radon and asbestos. Using a sunbed before the age of 20 increases the risk of melanoma skin cancer by 47% compared to those who have never used one, according to WHO.

Reducing avoidable cancer risks is a central action in the upcoming National Cancer Plan and will help make England a world leader for cancer survival.

Health Minister Karin Smyth said:

Stronger protections on sunbeds are needed so people understand risks that could have deadly consequences.

The evidence is clear: there is no safe level of sunbed use, yet too many young people are being exposed to a known carcinogen with little understanding of the risks.

These proposals will crack down on rogue operators and ensure the law is properly enforced. Prevention saves lives, and we will do everything we can to protect people from avoidable cancers.

There are inherent risks associated with exposure to UV radiation emitted from sunbeds. This is why the Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010 bans under 18s from using commercial sunbeds and requires businesses to prevent children from using them. Despite this, there is evidence that rogue operators are continuing to sell these services to teenagers.

Louise Dodds, who is living with melanoma, said:

My melanoma was found completely by chance during a private consultation for something unrelated, a mole that had become dark and itchy was removed quickly, and within a week I was told it was stage 1B melanoma.

Hearing the word 'cancer' sent me into shock. I was rushed back into the NHS system for more surgery and lymph node tests, all within weeks. The procedures and the waits for results were brutal.

Although some results were clear, others were inconclusive, leaving me living with constant uncertainty. If I'd known earlier how dangerous UV exposure and sunbeds were, I would never have taken the risk.

Susanna Daniels, Chief Executive Officer of Melanoma Focus, said:

We are delighted that the government is taking real steps to tackle the use of sunbeds by those under 18, as well as planning to consult on the use of sunbeds more broadly. The need for action is clear, with 34% of UK 16 to 17 year olds using sunbeds despite them being illegal for under 18s. Additionally, the rates of melanoma in the UK have risen considerably.

To protect your skin and reduce your chances of being diagnosed with melanoma or other skin cancers, we strongly advise against using sunbeds. Melanoma skin cancer is the fifth most common cancer in the UK. The time to act is now and we therefore support the action the Department of Health and Social Care is proposing.

The crackdown forms part of the government's wider focus on prevention in the forthcoming National Cancer Plan, which will set out our ambition to reduce lives lost to cancer.

By tackling avoidable risk factors before they lead to serious illness, the government is taking a proactive approach to reducing pressure on the NHS and improving outcomes for patients. Prevention is not just good for public health - it is essential to building a sustainable health service for the future.

In 2023, there were almost a quarter of a million new skin cancer diagnoses in the UK, costing the NHS an estimated £750 million annually.

Despite these risks, public awareness remains dangerously low. Polling from Melanoma Focus shows that only 62% of adults know that sunbed use increases cancer risk, and nearly a quarter of 18 to 25 year olds wrongly believe sunbeds actually reduce their risk of cancer.

The consultation will also seek views from businesses, including the many small and medium sized enterprises that operate in the tanning industry.

The government recognises the need to balance public health protections with the impact on businesses and will use the consultation to gather evidence on costs and practicalities. This will ensure that any new requirements are proportionate, enforceable, and deliver meaningful improvements to public safety.

Additionally, a call for evidence will also be launched to understand whether further action to reduce cases of melanoma is justified.

Professor Meghana Pandit, National Medical Director at NHS England, said:

A sunbed tan might only last a few weeks, but the damage can last a lifetime.

Sunbeds blast your skin with high levels of UV radiation raising the risk of melanoma and other skin cancers, particularly for young people.

These proposals, as part of the National Cancer Plan, will help close dangerous loopholes, crack down on illegal sunbed use and keep people safe.

Tracy Paine MBE, Chief Executive Officer of Melanoma UK, said:

Melanoma UK strongly supports urgent strengthening of sunbed legislation to protect public health, particularly for young people. Evidence from the WHO, Cancer Research UK and the British Association of Dermatologists is clear: sunbeds significantly increase the risk of melanoma by causing DNA damage through high-intensity UV radiation, particularly when used at a young age. There is no safe level of exposure.

The Sunbeds (Regulation) Act 2010 has not been applied consistently across the UK, allowing avoidable harm to continue. With indoor tanning having grown in popularity among younger adults, new rules and stronger action in this area would be welcomed.

We support mandatory, prominent health warnings with visual imagery, clear signage on UV risks, tighter monitoring of premises, and sustained education and awareness campaigns to change behaviour early and reduce preventable melanoma deaths.

Natasha Gowan, who has skin cancer, said:

In my 20s, having a tan felt important, and I didn't understand the dangers of sunbeds.

I used them frequently for around two years, thinking nothing of it.

Twenty years later, a mole I'd had forever started to change, it turned out to be melanoma that had already spread to my lymph nodes and I was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer.

I needed multiple operations, underwent a year of immunotherapy and now live with the constant fear of it returning or spreading. No tan is worth the physical and emotional toll this has taken on my life.

Background information

The public consultation on strengthening sunbed safeguards will launch in spring 2026 and run for 12 weeks.

Current restrictions in England only ban under 18s from using sunbeds. There is no current requirement for mandatory ID checks, supervised use, or provision of health risk information.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a WHO agency, has classified UV-emitting tanning devices, such as sunbeds, a Group 1 carcinogen.

A 2024 survey by Melanoma Focus found that 25% of all adults have used a sunbed in their lifetime, rising to 43% among 18 to 25 year olds.

Australia banned commercial sunbeds in 2016 and Brazil in 2009. Independent research estimates the Australian ban has saved AU\$64 million in healthcare costs and delivered productivity gains of AU\$516 million.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crackdown-on-illegal-underage-sunbeds-use-to-cut-teen-cancer-risk>