

Use of Skin Analyzers to Reinforce Skin Cancer Education

Skin analyzers are portable devices that allow users to see facial sun damage caused by exposure to the Sun and tanning lamps. They are manufactured by several companies but they are also available for loan to schools and non-profit organizations at no cost from most American Cancer Society offices.

Weak ultraviolet lamps and a magnifying mirror inside the viewing curtains allow viewers to see facial sun damage, much of which occurs just below the skin surface where it is invisible in normal light. A viewing port behind the analyzer also allows observers to see user's faces. Skin damage caused by excessive UV exposure appears as brown or purple freckles. Other colored and/or glowing spots and areas will also be seen but are usually normal and do not indicate UV damage.

The SkinAnalyzerHandout.pdf file in this folder provides information about the meaning of different colors and is for printing, photocopying, and distribution to students and adults after screening.

Skin analyzers are NOT diagnostic; they are for educational and awareness purposes only but they have proven effective in providing "wake-up calls" to students and adults with sun-damaged skin.

When providing feedback to someone after screening here are points to keep in mind:

1. Sun damage does NOT mean someone has skin cancer or will necessarily get skin cancer; it only indicates one of the risk factors for skin cancer. Likewise, lack of sun damage does not necessarily mean the risk of skin cancer is low.
2. Individuals with facial sun damage often have sun damage on other parts of their bodies.
3. Persons with "normal" freckles and/or red hair tend to have more sun-sensitive skin than other individuals and usually see severe freckling in the analyzer. "Normal" freckles are also caused by sun damage.
4. Sunscreens, foundations, make-up, and lotions often contain UV-absorbing ingredients which display as purple areas on the face and hide underlying damage. Unless these are removed the machine will not provide an accurate reading.
5. Likewise, tanned skin may absorb some of the UV light in the analyzer and hide underlying damage.

The take-home lesson to students using the skin analyzer should be:

Don't add to the damage you already have by getting sunburns or using tanning beds.

Because the most dangerous skin cancer, melanoma, may occur anywhere, including unexposed skin, sun protection is not enough. It is also essential to perform a complete self-skin exam every month looking for changing or new marks on the skin.