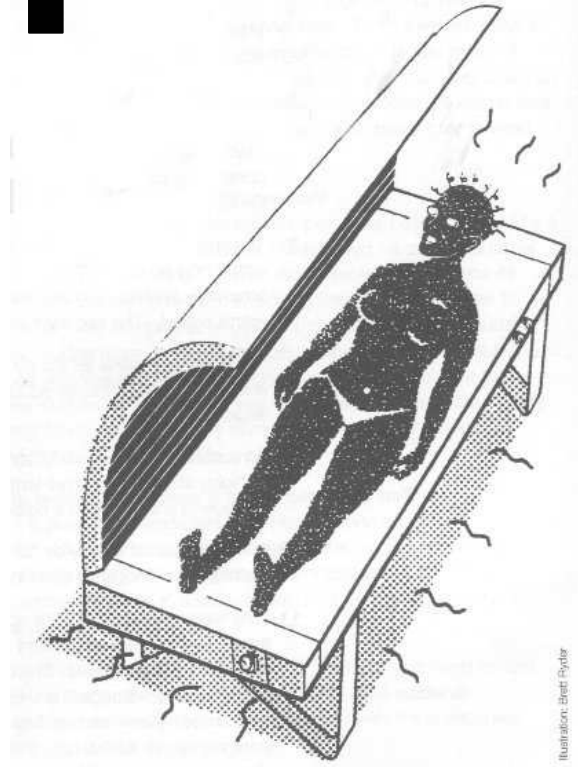


Sun vampires

They're desperate for a sun fix. They spend hours incarcerated in hi-tech coffins. Cayte Williams meets the "tanorexics"



You're lying in a big plastic cocoon. Weird blue light beats down at you through hi-tech glass and there's a strange humming noise. You're naked and sweating profusely. Have you been abducted by aliens for experimental tests? No, you're lying on a sunbed and if you're doing it more than once a week then you could be seriously addicted.

The Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) recently released a fact sheet outlining the dangerous effects of indoor tanning. "There is extreme concern for 'tanorexics'," says Christine Suggars, a spokesperson for the ICRF. "Especially people who have a dangerous desire for a permanent tan and use sunbeds more than once a week." So who are these walking raisins, and why do they need a regular sunbed fix?

Often tanorexics prefer to buy a sunbed rather than visit a suntanning salon. And let's face it, anyone who's prepared to fork out £1,600 on the initial machinery must have one hell of a habit. "I bought a sunbed 10 years ago," recalls Jane Horwood, a 37-year-old interior designer. "I used it once a week at first, but this gradually became once a night. I used to go on it religiously after work and hated it when I couldn't go underneath."

"It's like smoking. Even though I knew I shouldn't be under there, I couldn't stop myself," she confesses. "I wanted to look healthy and was really upset that when I got pregnant my doctor told me I couldn't go on the sunbed. It's an obsession with self image and self esteem, like anorexia. If you're browner, you think you're going to have a nicer lifestyle, be more attractive. If I hadn't got pregnant I would never have stopped."

Over use of sunbeds can lead to all kinds of nasty side-effects. "Apart from premature skin ageing, people who use sunbeds for more than 20 sessions of 30 minutes per year run the risk of developing skin fragility," says Doctor Julia Newton Bishop, consultant dermatologist at St James' University Hospital in Leeds. "The skin becomes very thin with a transparent texture and it bruises and blisters easily. Normally I would only expect to see this problem in the elderly but I have seen some young patients suffering from this who over-use tanning equipment."

"An average 30 minutes on a sunbed gives you the same dose of

It's an obsession with self-image and self-esteem, like anorexia

UVA rays as a day at the beach," says Christine Suggars. "UVB rays have been linked to skin cancer for many years, but it's only now that

the concern is growing over the effects of UVA rays. UVB rays affect the top layer of the skin, the epidermis, and also the melanocyte cells, to produce brown pigment," she explains. "UVA rays penetrate the skin more deeply, damaging the elastin (which keeps the skin supple) and collagen (which maintains the skin's thickness) in the skin's middle layer, causing sagging skin and wrinkles."

This is not good news for the suntanning industry. The Tanning Shop opened its first branch in the UK in 1992 and now has over 150 branches around the country. The company advocates "controlled tanning" and specialised programmes can cost up to £399 a year. "People aren't happy just to pop into a booth anymore," explains marketing co-ordinator Rachel O'Donnell. "They want us to tell them what to do."

Customers are warned about the dangers of over-tanning and are

given a 'consultation' before their first sunbed session. "They can only ever have a session every second day and fair-skinned people are allowed six minutes a session which might go on to 10 minutes eventually. Customers are more fussy about what they get," says O'Donnell.

The Tanning Shops' black vertical tanning booths look unnervingly like upright coffins, but tanorexics will not be put off. "I go two to three times a week," says 27-year-old accountant, Victoria Williams. "It makes me feel healthier, just like when you come back from holiday."

Victoria started using sunbeds to clear up a skin complaint, but now she's hooked. "I did worry about addiction," she says, "so I didn't go on the sunbed for a month, but I started to get miserable when I got pasty. I wanted that heat and warmth on my body." Is she worried about the latest sunbed scare? "You have BSE, listeria, salmonella," she says defiantly "I think there is some scare every week and it's over-hyped. I would only stop using sunbeds if they were banned."

A favourite haunt of the shameless tanorexic is Electric Beach in London's Covent Garden. Here models and media people pop in for a top-up on a regular basis. On Saturday, the last celebs seen crossing its portals were Luke and Matt Goss, formerly of Bros. Who says tanning isn't trendy? "We are looking to cater for those people who live a London life," says managing director Philip Hodgeson. "People go in and they come out tanned. We use bulbs as opposed to tubes with a potassium filter, which filters out 99.9 per cent of the UVB rays."

While women openly admit to tanning addiction, men are much more secretive. Last year Paddy Ashdown suffered great embarrassment when a beautician let slip that he'd checked in for a session on a sunbed. It seemed his rugged outdoor tan was of the indoor variety and the Lib Dem office put the habit down to his doctor's advice for soothing a minor skin complaint.

John Stevens (not his real name), a 28 year old lawyer, identifies with Paddy's blushes over his ruddy complexion. "When you're tanned you look healthy, fit and well travelled," he says, "and in business it's good, because it makes you look

wealthier, like you can afford regular holidays. But there's this unspoken idea that a 'real man' should get his tan doing something rugged and adventurous. I would never want my mates to know that I use a sunbed."

And, of course, there's Essex Man with his perennial tandoori tan. "There's one who comes in every night," says Shaune Taylor of Tanning Trends in Barking. "He's in his 30s, he's working out, and wants the tan to go with it. You know what men are like," she muses. "They want to be Peter Andre."

The Big Issue May 1997