

Brampton woman tells her tanning bed cancer story

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By PETER CRISCIONE

A 25-year-old Brampton resident has become the poster model for a new national marketing campaign targeting women who frequently use tanning beds.

Bianca Castellano, a skin cancer survivor, is one of several women featured in this new national media drive, launched by the Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA) on Monday with the aim of informing people about the dangers of indoor tanning.

Castellano, who is described as olive-skinned, began using ultraviolet or UV tanning beds at the age of 16 to get "a darker tan and feel warm and relaxed."

She used tanning beds twice a week for the next six years until she was diagnosed with melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

Castellano is now sharing her story to caution others about avoiding tanning beds and tanning outdoors.

"There was one spot on my left forearm that was changing. It was very irregular, grew quickly and was elevated," reads a brief bio on Castellano posted on the CDA website www.dermatology.ca/indoortanning.

The "spot" or mole on her arm was removed and after extensive tests the melanoma diagnosis was confirmed.

Castellano says her first feeling was one of extreme fear.

"That changed into denial, then anger and even depression," Castellano said. "Finally, I started moving forward and talking about it. It helps to know I can warn people - my family and friends..."

Recently, Castellano discovered her second melanoma.

About eight months ago, while doing a regular skin check, she discovered a mole on the top of her right arm that changed in size and colour and grew quickly. It was soon diagnosed as melanoma and "a five-inch scar is left to remind her of that surgery."

"Ultimately, it's their decision to make," she said. "All I can do is make (people) aware of the dangers."

The CDA warns indoor tanning before the age of 30 has been associated with a significant increase in the risk of melanoma.

As part of its campaign, the CDA has commissioned posters as well as television and radio announcements with the theme, "Indoor Tanning is Out".

Public service announcements will be aired across Canada between February and June, including March Break and pre-Prom, when many young people are likely to use indoor tanning equipment, the CDA said.

Cheryl Rosen, dermatologist and national director of CDA's Sun Awareness Program, said the campaign primarily targets women under age 30.

"Research shows 70 percent of indoor tanners are female, primarily 16 to 29 years old," Rosen said. "Indoor tanning at this age increases the risk of developing skin cancer. It is very important for women to be aware of the risks of artificial tanning."