

Elon professor finds tanning to be addictive

by Eliot Sasaki, April 6, 2010

The golden skin earned through time in tanning salons is an addictive procedure, according to a recent study by Mat Gendle, associate professor of psychology at Elon University.

"Much like smoking, you've got a behavior that's habit-forming, leads to cancer and is entirely preventable," said Gendle.

On March 25, The Charlotte Observer published a column written by Gendle about his research on the addictiveness of tanning beds. For Gendle, what began as a student-generated question quickly formed a topic of study.

"I had gone to a couple students who were interested in public health and said, you know there's this emerging literature about self-tanning possibly being habit-forming — and it just grew out of that," Gendle said.

In the fall of 2008, optional surveys were given to first-year students in Health and Wellness classes.

Of the 145 students who took the survey, 5.5 percent of males self-identified as tanners. Meanwhile, 55.2 percent of females self-identified as tanners.

The finding reported a high number of college students meet the criteria for ultraviolet light dependency.

"Depending on which criteria you used, anywhere between about 10 and 20 percent that self-identified as tanners met the clinical criteria for dependency," Gendle said.

Gendle said the research raises discussion about tanning as an addiction and the implications of that idea.

"What it basically means is that if you have someone who is feeling this compulsion about tanning, there may well be a biological reason why the person is feeling that way," Gendle said. "It helps the students understand this is a legitimate thing."

Sophomore Rachel Vargyai started tanning indoors last year on a regular basis, though did so somewhat sporadically.

"Sometimes I tan every other day for a month," Vargyai said. "Other times I don't for months. I used to go for five or six minutes and now I go for 20."

Vargyai's not hesitant to empty her pocket for a nice tan, but she agrees with Gendle regarding the addictive nature of tanning.

"I definitely believe there's an addiction," Vargyai said. "People are orange all year round."