



Article Link: <http://www.webmd.com/skin-problems-and-treatments/features/how-life-affects-aging-skin?page=3>

## Skin Problems & Treatments Health Center

### A Wrinkle in Time: Preventing Damage to Aging Skin

#### How ethnicity, environment, and lifestyle affect skin.

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WebMD Feature

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Like a snowflake, no two faces are identical, even on identical twins. The color of our skin, eyes, and hair varies, as does the shape of our eyebrows, cheekbones, lips, and noses.

How our skin ages also varies, based on factors from heredity and ethnicity to the kinds of foods we eat and the time we spend sleeping or in the sun. To choose the best skin care routine for your skin, understanding your skin and how lifestyle and environment affect it are the first steps.

#### Skin Care 101: What Is Your Skin Type?

Spending a day on the beach with a friend can be a good lesson in what gradations in skin shade mean for skin care. Let's say that you inherited fair skin from your Irish grandmother, while your friend's ancestors were Mediterranean. While her olive complexion tans within minutes, yours goes right to sunburn.

Dermatologists organize skin into six types, with type I being the lightest and type VI being very dark. "Anyone who is a four and above has more melanin in their skin, which protects them from the sun," says Monica Halem, MD, dermatologist and assistant clinical professor at Columbia University Medical Center Eastside.

"A black African with skin type VI, for example, doesn't feel the aging effects of the sun as much as a blond-haired, blue-eyed, light-skinned person of Scandinavian descent, at a level one," Halem says. Ethnic groups that tend to have more melanin -- blacks, Hispanics, and Asians -- often reap the benefit in skin that looks younger than that of their lighter skinned peers.

However, more melanin also puts skin at higher risk of scarring and pigmentation problems. And it doesn't mean people with darker skin are safe from sun damage, so it's important to wear sunscreen.

#### What Happens to Aging Skin

As you age your body begins to slow production of two components of the skin: collagen and elastin. This leads to fine lines and wrinkles. The breakdown of these proteins is made worse by sun exposure and gravity, and results in the sagging appearance of aged skin.

Your skin continues to change as you age. It becomes thinner, drier, and more fragile as the inner layer of skin (the dermis) starts to thin. Fat beneath the skin, in the cheeks, chin, and nose, disappears, causing skin to sag. Facial hair increases, pores enlarge, and women going through hormonal changes may experience acne and breakouts similar to those in their teen years.

For people with oily skin, breakouts may never fade with age. The good news is that people with oily skin ward off wrinkles better than those with dry skin, as the oils keep their skin moister and smoother.

Women with dry skin should continue to moisturize, even before wrinkles begin to appear, to lessen their impact. Those with oily skin can keep skin clear and less wrinkled with hypoallergenic moisturizers.

The body's ability to fight free radicals that attack and damage cells and collagen also slows with age. Antioxidants work to protect skin of free radicals and improve its appearance, repairing damage and moisturizing the skin. Antioxidants are found in Vitamins C, E, and A, which should be a regular part of a healthy diet. Many skin care products now include these antioxidants in their formulas, as well.

#### The Glaring Facts About Sun Damage

As we age, past sun damage also catches up with us in the form of age spots and wrinkles -- no matter what our skin type. "Some of this happens naturally with age, but you don't want to accelerate the wrinkling process," says Marilyn Berzin, MD,

dermatologist at DC Derm Docs in Washington, D.C.

"What can accelerate the process is sun exposure and damage to the skin from the environment. Sun exposure is the No. 1 cause of harm to the skin, so you should wear sunscreen from the day you are born." No type of skin is immune to sun damage.

Although 90% of skin damage is due to the sun, it's also very preventable with the right protection. Here are some tips for getting the most from sunscreens:

Wear sunscreen at all times, even when running errands or driving to work. Every minute in the sun counts.

Pick a sunscreen that blocks both UVA and UVB rays. An SPF of at least 15 provides protection against both these rays.

Apply sunscreen before going outdoors.

Remember that once is not enough. Just because you slather on sunscreen in the morning doesn't mean you can stay out in the noontime sun without any risk. You need to reapply sunscreen at least every two hours, even on cloudy days

Wear a wide-brimmed hat. Even with sunscreen, you should still take precautions such as avoiding the fiercest sun and shading your face.

The best reason to wear sunscreen: it not only prevents aging and wrinkled skin, but wards off skin cancer, which is on the rise, especially among teens and young adults. In fact, the American Cancer Society estimates about 59,940 cases of melanoma were diagnosed in 2007.

### Your Skin Care Choices

No matter what your skin type, the environment plays a significant role in how you age and how healthy your skin remains with each passing year. For example, pollution -- including secondhand cigarette smoke, cleaning chemicals, and automobile emissions -- can cause skin problems.

Stress can wreak havoc on skin as well. "Stress produces hormones that increase the levels of free radicals in the body, suppresses the immune system, dehydrates the body, and thins the skin," says Berzin. It can also lead to acne, upset the body's ability to help skin renew and replenish itself, and cause hives, eczema, itching, or redness. Stress also wears down the body's ability to fight free radicals and bacteria.

Just as your lifestyle choices can deplete your skin, so can they lead to healthier skin. Here are some that will:

Exercise. It can reduce stress and help you sleep better, leading to healthier skin.

Don't skimp on sleep. "Sleep is your skin's chance to repair damage done during the day," says Halem. Seven to eight hours a night allows your face to relax and smooth wrinkles, avoid dirt and grime in the air, and rejuvenate, with the help of moisturizers and creams applied before bed.

Eat healthy, look healthy. When it comes to diet, beauty really does come from within. Healthy eating can keep skin youthful. Diets rich in vitamin C and antioxidants help prevent wrinkles and fight free radicals that damage skin cells.

### Your Skin Care Choices continued...

"We definitely know foods can affect skin because we see it when there is a deficiency," says Berzin. "If there is a deficiency in vitamin C, it can cause scurvy. A deficiency in zinc can lead to a scaly, red rash. An iron deficiency can lead to hair loss. The best thing you can do for your skin is to eat well-balanced meals."

Think before you drink. To moisturize your skin from within, dermatologists recommend drinking water. "When you drink water, the cells absorb that water and look plumper, smoothing out wrinkles," says Halem.

The opposite is true of beverages that dehydrate the body and the skin, especially alcohol and caffeinated drinks. Coffee, alcohol, and soda can also deplete the body of nutrients that keep skin from looking tired and dull, cause facial flushing and worsen skin conditions such as rosacea.

Stay away from cigarettes. Smoking is second only to sun damage in causing wrinkles and dry skin. Studies have shown that smokers have significantly more fine wrinkles than nonsmokers due to an enzyme that destroys collagen. Smoking also slows the body's ability to produce new collagen, making it a double-whammy.

Once you understand your skin and how age and the world around you plays a role in its health, you can help prevent and reverse damage to it. There are many products to help rejuvenate aging skin: moisturizers to keep it hydrated; exfoliants to remove dead skin cells for a fresh appearance; bleaching creams to fade sun spots and hyperpigmentation; and retinoids to

repair damaged skin cells. But preventing as much damage as possible is the best beginning for keeping your skin healthy and youthful for years to come.

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Reviewed on February 18, 2009

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Abdomen

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