

Food for Your Skin

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Research suggests that deficiencies in vital nutrients, proteins and essential fatty acids can sabotage the health and beauty of your skin. Skin care and nutraceutical companies routinely promise a healthier, younger appearance through the use of nutritional supplements. Surveys indicate that there are a growing number of Americans who purchase over-the-counter supplements because they believe that their diets do not adequately support health, disease prevention and anti-aging. Books about the relationship between nutrition and beauty are making best-seller lists, while skin care formulations are more widely available today than ever. What follows is some insight into the role that diet plays in skin care.

Nutrition's role

Science continues to support the idea that a healthy, well-balanced diet not only reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes and possibly certain types of cancer, but also contributes to a feeling of vitality and energy. The foods you eat contain nutrients; these nutrients come in the form of vitamins, minerals, enzymes, amino acids, carbohydrates and lipids. They sustain life by providing the body with the basic materials needed for its daily functions. Research has shown that each part of the body contains high concentrations of certain nutrients, and that a nutritional deficiency will cause the body part to malfunction and, eventually, break down.

To keep this from happening, you need to maintain a proper diet. The skin's ability to defend itself against environmental damage as well as to renew and repair itself is supported by these nutrients. With proper nutrition, exercise and stress management, you substantially can affect the aging process and the youthful look of the skin. It is important to remember, however, that it's not about what you eat—it's about what you digest and absorb. Unless you can digest your foods, you can't get all their nutrients into your cells. When eating for health and beauty, it is important to remember that nutrients and other food components work together in a complex way in your body. No matter how healthy a food may be, it needs to be part of a balanced eating plan.

Foods make an impact

Essential fatty acids have been used in moisturizers for years, but now dermatologists see evidence that diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids can help combat dry skin conditions. "I see an improvement in my eczema and psoriasis patients when they increase their intake of omega-rich foods" said Howard Sobel, MD, director of Skin & Spa Medi-Center in New York City.

In a study conducted at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield, England, 28 patients with chronic psoriasis were treated with either fish oil capsules or placebos daily. After eight weeks, patients who consumed the fish oil reported significantly less itching and scaling.*

Essential fatty acids are crucial to health but cannot be made in the body. When taken orally, they enhance the well-being of skin cells and act as a barrier against environmental allergens and irritants, often improving hydration and skin texture. Fish and flaxseed oils are good sources of essential fatty acids. For example, flaxseed can be purchased from organic sources, is inexpensive, and is rich in fiber and lignans.

Demystifying ORAC

The rating of oxygen radical absorbance capacity is known as ORAC. UV light and environmental pollutants generate free radicals in the skin and body. Free radicals are a natural result of the body's metabolic process; however, they also are known to damage healthy DNA cells. Antioxidants neutralize and protect cells from these free radicals and help to repair cellular damage. Unfortunately, there are many antioxidants from which to choose, and each acts in a different way to protect the cells. Marketers mislead when they suggest that a single antioxidant is the most powerful. Nutritionists believe that there are antioxidants in natural food sources that have yet to be discovered, and that eating a variety of these foods is the best way to ensure good health. In addition, studies have supported the concept that fruits, vegetables and green tea all have anti-inflammatory benefits when eaten as part of a well-balanced diet.

The acne issue

Many dermatologists feel there is no real relationship between acne development and an individual's pattern of food consumption. The connection is associated with the fact that those who eat a lot of junk food simply do not get enough of the good nutrients that are needed to support healthy skin function.

One nutrient that is thought to help to improve acne is zinc. "I see many vegetarians in my practice with blemishes," said Sobel. "While they have diets rich in fruits and vegetables, many do not get enough absorbed zinc through vegetarian sources."

Adding 25 milligrams of zinc to a topical acne solution often will accelerate the healing process. Since the best and most absorbable source of zinc is found in meat, supplementation often is needed.

Supplemental insurance

The touting of vitamins and other nutrients to beautify the skin has certainly become very popular, but diet should be your first line of defense in supporting the body. Eating a variety of foods every day or over the course of a week helps to ensure an adequate mix of nutrients. In this body-image society, supplements are replacing food, but supplements can vary greatly in quality, potency and formulation. Foods supply a synergistic balance provided by nature; formulators of vitamin supplements can only guess at that balance.

Skin care professionals are responsible for the overall well-being of their clients. If you don't understand the full medical history of your client and are not knowledgeable about prescription/herb interactions, you may not be servicing your clients' best interests. If you want to bring supplements into your spa—as they can greatly add to your revenue—you should consider having a registered nutritionist on staff who can carefully evaluate each client. Be as careful when recommending supplements as you are when deciding which skin care treatment is most appropriate for your clients.

The nonprofit, nongovernmental United States Pharmacopeia (USP) has begun certifying dietary supplements for label accuracy. USP is one of several independent certifiers who have stepped up in recent years to help set standards for dietary supplements. Under the program, manufacturers voluntarily submit and pay for their products to be tested. Supplements are tested for integrity—the declared amount of correct ingredients; purity—acceptable limits for contaminants; dissolution—proper breakdown absorption; and good manufacturing practices—sanitary conditions. Those products that pass this testing and an on-site audit and manufacturing plant inspection may display the USP Dietary Supplement Verified mark. USP randomly retests products to make sure that quality is maintained.

For a list of verified manufacturers and more information about USP's verification process, go to www.uspverified.org.

Food sources in skin care products

The idea of adding food nutrients to skin care products is based upon the proven dietary science that all cells need proteins, carbohydrates and fats to enable the body to optimally function. Every minute of every day, thousands of chemical reactions occur in every cell. The goal of biochemistry—the scientific discipline that studies these reactions—is to harness the synergy of the building blocks of nature to revive cellular metabolism. In order to do this, cells use amino acids from proteins, simple sugars from carbohydrates and fatty acids, and glycerols from oils and fats. Some food sources act to nourish and protect cells from free radical damage, while others act to supply energy and feed metabolic activity. Some very select proteins have the ability to mimic the body's natural growth factors and act as cell messengers. Direct application of food-based skin care is thought to bring these nutrients directly to the skin and, in combination with other skin care, can be effective in supporting skin health.

Feed your skin for good health; feed your mind for an enriched life.

Skin Inc. magazine recommends that you seek your physician's advice before making any changes in your diet.