



Your skin

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Taking care of the body's largest organ

Your skin may not seem as important to you as your heart, but neglecting it can cause problems.

“The skin becomes thinner due to the loss of underlying collagen and elastin,” says Susan Stuart, M.D., board-certified dermatologist and faculty instructor at University of California San Diego Medical Center in San Diego, Calif. “The fatty layer also thins, which makes blood vessels and bones more prominent. The oil glands shrink, leading to scaling and flaking.”

These changes cause skin to lose its ability to do what it does best—protect you from infection, help you sense hot and cold, and regulate your body temperature. Some medical conditions (diabetes in particular) can make your skin fragile, as can medications such as steroids.

How dry I am

Skin dryness is by far the biggest problem for seniors. “Dry skin is more than a cosmetic problem,” says Vrinda Suneja, M.D., medical director at Fox Run, an Erickson Living community in Novi, Mich. “It can itch, and scratching can lead to tiny breaks in the skin which make you more prone to infection.” Many medications may also contribute to dryness, especially diuretics.

“Drying of the skin may worsen already existing skin disorders such as eczema,” Stuart adds.

Take care of dry skin every day and you will notice changes quickly. “Shower and bathe less—maybe every other day instead of daily. Use warm water instead of hot,” Suneja advises. “Use a mild soap with a moisturizer base.

“Right after bathing or showering, apply a moisturizer,” Suneja adds.

“I recommend using a hypoallergenic cream or ointment,” says **Rebecca Baxt, M.D., board-certified dermatologist and assistant professor of clinical dermatology at New York University**. “Lotions are not usually effective enough for older people. Petroleum jelly, in fact, works amazingly well and it's very inexpensive.”

When choosing moisturizers, avoid lanolin. “Many older people are sensitive to lanolin,” Baxt explains.

Aside from moisturizing, there are other things you can do to take care of your skin. “Drink sufficient amounts of liquids,” Suneja says. “But avoid caffeine and alcohol, as both can contribute to dry skin.” Using humidifiers may also help.

“Don't use medicated creams unless you check with your doctor first. Some can make skin conditions worse,” Suneja explains. “And if you have to scratch, use the pulp of your finger and not the nail. Or scratch through clothing rather than directly on your skin.”

Many people may notice dryness, especially on their lower legs. “This is due to swelling,” Suneja explains. “Vascular disease or other health conditions may cause you to retain fluid in your legs. Elevating your legs can help. Your doctor may recommend medication changes or compressive legwear.”

Skin cancers

The most common skin cancers are basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma. “Basal cell carcinoma is the most common cancer in humans, and it is most prevalent in the elderly population,” Baxt says. “Skin that has been exposed to the sun is the most common site of these cancers. They grow slowly and don't usually spread to other areas. Melanoma, while less common, spreads and can be fatal.”

Skin cancers are not usually painful, so do a monthly all-over check for skin changes such as a new growth, sores that won't heal, bleeding moles, or other changes in moles or pigmented spots. Get help from someone to check hard-to-see areas such as your scalp and back. It may be hard to tell the difference between cancer and harmless changes (such as age spots and skin tags), so see your doctor if you notice anything new.

“I've had patients in their 90s diagnosed with new skin cancers,” Suneja says. “So no matter how old you are, always wear sunscreen.”

Maybe you've done everything right for your skin's health and you want it to look better. “Topical agents such as retinoids and alpha hydroxyl acids, or the use of glycolic peels or other minimal invasive treatments can treat sun damage, pigment changes, or fine lines and wrinkles,” says Robert T. Grant, M.D., plastic surgeon-in-chief for the combined divisions of plastic surgery at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center. “All of these can really make a difference for seniors.”