

Skin Care and Aging



Amy had always been proud of her skin, especially her summer tan. But as she grew older, she saw she was getting more fine lines and wrinkles. She began to worry about what other skin problems she may have. What were those brown spots on her hands and arms?

Your skin changes with age. It becomes thinner, loses fat, and no longer looks as plump and smooth as it once did. Your veins and bones can be seen more easily. Scratches, cuts, or bumps can take longer to heal. Years of sun tanning or being out in the sunlight for a long time can lead to wrinkles, dryness, age spots, and even cancer. But there are things you can do to help your skin.

Dry Skin and Itching

Many older people suffer from dry skin, often on their lower legs, elbows, and lower arms. Dry skin feels rough and scaly. There are many possible reasons for dry skin, such as:

- Not drinking enough liquids
- Staying out in the sun
- Being in very dry air
- Smoking
- Having stress
- Losing sweat and oil glands (common with age)

Dry skin also can be caused by health problems, such as diabetes or kidney disease. Using too much soap, antiperspirant, or perfume and taking hot baths will make dry skin worse.

Because older people have thinner skin, scratching itches can cause bleeding that can lead to infection. Some medicines make the skin itchier. Itching can cause sleep problems. If your skin is very dry and itchy, see your doctor.

Moisturizers like lotions, creams, or ointments can soothe dry, itchy skin. They should be used everyday. Try taking fewer baths and using milder soap to help your dry skin. Warm water is better than hot water for your skin. Some people find that a humidifier (an appliance that adds moisture to a room) helps.

Bruises

Older people may bruise more easily than younger people. And, it can take longer for the bruises to heal. Some medicines or illnesses cause easier bruising. If you see bruises and you don't know how you got them, especially on parts of your body usually covered by clothing, see your doctor.

Wrinkles

Over time, skin begins to wrinkle. Things in the environment, like ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun, make the skin less elastic. Gravity can cause skin to sag and wrinkle.

Certain habits like frowning also wrinkle the skin. Some of these habits are easier to change than others. You may not be able to change how you lie when you sleep, but you can quit smoking. Not smoking is a great way to prevent wrinkles.

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Age Spots

Age spots are sometimes called “liver spots,” but they have nothing to do with the liver. These flat, brown spots are often caused by years in the sun. They are bigger than freckles, flat, and many times show up on areas like the face, hands, arms, back, and feet. Age spots are harmless, but if they bother you, talk to a dermatologist about removing them. Also, a sunscreen or sunblock may prevent more sun damage.

Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. The main cause of skin cancer is the sun. Sunlamps and tanning booths can also cause skin cancer. Anyone can get cancer, but people with fair skin that freckles easily are at greatest risk. Skin cancer may be cured if it is found before it spreads to other parts of the body.

There are three types of skin cancers. Two types, *basal cell carcinoma* and *squamous cell carcinoma*, grow slowly and rarely spread to other parts of the body. These types of cancer are found mostly on parts of the skin exposed to the sun, like the head, face, neck, hands, and arms, but can happen anywhere on your body. The third and most dangerous type of skin cancer is *melanoma*. It is rarer than the other types, but can spread to other organs and be deadly.

Check your skin regularly, like once a month, for things that may be cancer. Look for changes such as a new growth, a sore that doesn't heal, or a bleeding mole. Also, check moles, birthmarks, or other parts of the skin for the “ABCDE's.” ABCDE stands for:

- A = asymmetry (one half of the growth looks different from the other half)
- B = borders that are irregular
- C = color changes or more than one color
- D = diameter greater than the size of a pencil eraser
- E = evolving, meaning changes in size, shape, symptoms (itching, tenderness), surface (especially bleeding), or shades of color

Don't wait for the area to hurt—skin cancer isn't usually painful. See your doctor right away if you have any of these signs.

Keep Your Skin Healthy

The best way to keep your skin healthy is to be careful in the sun.

- ✓ **Limit time in the sun.**
- ✓ **Use sunscreen.**
- ✓ **Wear protective clothing.**
- ✓ **Avoid tanning.**

Your skin may change with age. But remember, there are things you can do to help. Check your skin often. If you find any changes that worry you, see your doctor.

Source: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/skin.htm>

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