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Skin

Applying a Balm to the Years

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

KEEPING skin healthy as decades pass can be as easy as remembering this adage: Accept the things you cannot change. Have the courage to change the things you can. Be wise enough to tell the difference.

Ah, that is the hard part. When \$89 anti-aging creams promise to lift saggy faces in just minutes, and some sunscreens claim to offer all-day protection, truth can be scarce. But dermatologists say there are simple and inexpensive ways to stave off premature aging and its attendant [wrinkles](#) and loss of collagen. Some of the following advice is backed by independent clinical research, while other practical tips come from board-certified dermatologists.

“I’m big on simplifying everything,” said Dr. Jeffrey S. Dover, an associate clinical professor of dermatology at [Yale University](#) School of Medicine. So he counsels his patients to “cleanse, treat, prevent” daily. Wash your face with your scrub, gel or foam of choice; slather on a sunscreen every morning to forestall further sun damage; and reverse the signs of photoaging by applying a prescription retinoid nightly like Renova or Retin-A, which is now available generically as tretinoin. “Retinoids take months and months to work,” said Dr. Dover, a co-author of a forthcoming book called “The Youth Equation.” “It’s not going to reverse 30 years of lying on the beach overnight.”

Still, diligent application of a topical retinoid has been shown to stimulate new collagen, lighten dark spots and even out complexions, said Dr. Bruce Katz, clinical professor of dermatology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. “It doesn’t do a heck of a lot,” said Dr. Katz, director of the Juva Skin and Laser Center in Manhattan. “But it does do something.”

Despite the fact that it has been proved for more than a decade that alpha-hydroxy acids (like glycolic acid) in topical forms can increase skin thickness and improve wrinkled and sun-damaged skin, most consumers hunting for an anti-aging cream on drugstore shelves don’t realize it.

The reason? Marketing muscle, Dr. Katz said. With cosmetic [pharmaceuticals](#) like the alpha-hydroxy acids, Dr. Katz explained, “multiple companies were behind them, but they didn’t have a lot of money invested, so there wasn’t a major motive to market.”

One potential downside is that alpha-hydroxy acids “thin out the epidermis, making it a little more sensitive to being sunburned,” but not nearly as sensitive as it is to Retin-A, he said. So he recommends that people who wear either product be sure to keep sunscreen on during the day as well.

Stress might also make you more susceptible to ultraviolet light. One study found that when mice were exposed to it, those who were stressed (by the smell of a predator) developed [tumors](#) at week 8, compared with week 21 in unstressed mice. “Can’t say the same for humans,” said Dr. Francisco Tausk, a professor of dermatology and [psychiatry](#) at the [University of Rochester](#) School of Medicine. Still, he said, “it’s quite suggestive. If you have chronic stress, and you’re exposed to a carcinogen such as ultraviolet light, you are more susceptible” to [cancer](#).

No need to go white-faced wearing [zinc](#) oxide anymore, just to protect against short UVB rays and longer UVA rays, said Dr. Amy Derick, a board-certified dermatologist in Barrington, Ill. Recently, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) has approved more broad-spectrum sunscreen products with Mexoryl SX, a European formula that is now widely available here and much less visible on the skin, she said. Dr. Derick also recommends Neutrogena sunscreens with Helioplex, which has a form of stabilized avobenzone for prolonged UVB/UVA effectiveness that won’t leave consumers feeling as if they’re “wearing a white mask.”

Several studies have shown that antioxidants also protect the skin from light, scavenging free radicals, said Dr. Derick, explaining, “antioxidants hook onto the free radicals generated by UV light and basically negate them.” She recommends applying [vitamins](#) C and E in the form of a serum.

Finally, don’t neglect your noggin. Last month, an epidemiological study of 51,704 [melanoma](#) cases nationwide showed that melanomas of the scalp and neck are disproportionately fatal. Dr. Anne Lachiewicz, lead author and a medical graduate of the [University of North Carolina](#) at Chapel Hill, said that after controlling for age, sex, [tumor](#) thickness and ulceration, the study found that 14 percent of people who developed scalp and neck melanoma died from them, compared with 6 percent of those with melanoma on their extremities, “where they might be more likely to notice a new and changing lesion.”

So dermatologists should inspect scalps for melanomas, and beachgoers should wear wide-brimmed hats.

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)