

# AgePage

## Skin Care And Aging

*Cynthia 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 may lead to wrinkles, dryness, age spots, and even cancer. But there are things you can do to protect your skin and to make it feel and look better.

### 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
- ◆ Feeling 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 can cause bleeding that may lead to infection. Some medicines make the skin itchier. 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 every day. Try taking fewer baths and using milder soap to help your dry skin. Warm water is less drying than hot water. Don't add bath oil to your water—it will make the tub too slippery. 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 may cause 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 also can wrinkle your skin. Some of these habits are easier to change than others. You may not be able to change your facial expressions, but you can quit smoking.

A lot of claims are made about how to make wrinkles go away. Not all of them work. Some can be painful or even dangerous, and many must be done by a doctor. Talk with a doctor specially trained in skin problems (a dermatologist) or your regular doctor if you are worried about wrinkles.

## Age Spots And Skin Tags

Age spots, once called "liver spots," are flat, brown spots often caused by

years in the sun. They are bigger than freckles, 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 tags are small, usually flesh-colored growths of skin that have a raised surface. They are a common occurrence as people age, especially for women. They are most often found on the eyelids, neck, and body folds such as the arm pit, chest, and groin. Skin tags are harmless, but they can become irritated. A doctor can remove them if they bother you.

## 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 once a month for things that may be cancer. Skin cancer is rarely painful. 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**symmetry (one half of the growth looks different from the other half)
- ◆ **B**orders that are irregular
- ◆ **C**olor changes or more than one color
- ◆ **D**iameter greater than the size of a pencil eraser
- ◆ **E**volving; this means the growth changes in size, shape, symptoms (itching, tenderness), surface (especially bleeding), or shades of color.

See your doctor right away if you have any of these signs.

## Keep Your Skin Healthy

Some sun can be good for you, but to keep your skin healthy, be careful.

- ◆ ***Limit time in the sun.*** Try to stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

This is when the sun's rays are strongest. Don't be fooled by cloudy skies. The sun's rays can go through clouds. You can also get sunburned if you are in water, so be careful when you are in a pool, lake, or the ocean.

◆ **Use sunscreen.** Look for a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) number of 15 or higher. It's best to choose sunscreen with "broad spectrum" on the label. Put the sunscreen on 15-30 minutes before you go outside. Sunscreen should be reapplied about every 2 hours. You need to put sunscreen on more often if you are swimming, sweating, or rubbing your skin with a towel.

◆ **Wear protective clothing.** A hat with a wide brim can shade your neck, ears, eyes, and head. Look for sunglasses that block 99 to 100 percent of the sun's rays. If you have to be in the sun, wear loose, lightweight, long-sleeved shirts and long pants or long skirts.

◆ **Avoid tanning.** Don't use sunlamps or tanning beds. Tanning pills are not approved by the FDA and might not be safe.

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.

## For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

### **American Academy of Dermatology**

P.O. Box 4014

Schaumburg, IL 60168

1-866-503-7546 (toll-free)

*www.aad.org*

### **National Cancer Institute**

Public Inquiries Office

6116 Executive Boulevard

Suite 300

Bethesda, MD 20892-8322

1-800-422-6237 (toll-free)

1-800-332-8615 (TTY/toll-free)

*www.cancer.gov*

### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse**

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

1-877-226-4267 (toll-free)

1-301-565-2966 (TTY)

*www.niams.nih.gov*

### **National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus**

*www.medlineplus.gov*

### **U.S. Food and Drug Administration**

10903 New Hampshire Avenue

Silver Spring, MD 20993

1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)

*www.fda.gov*

For more information on health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging  
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

*www.nia.nih.gov*

*www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol*

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to *www.nia.nih.gov/health*.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth

(*www.nihseniorhealth.gov*), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



**National Institute on Aging**

National Institutes of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and  
Human Services

January 2008  
Updated March 2011

