

Caring for your skin

You probably know that a healthy-looking tan isn't healthy at all. Too much sun over too long a period of time will make your skin leathery and wrinkled and greatly increase your chances of skin cancer.

Dry skin

Natural changes of aging tend to result in drying of the skin. To keep your skin from drying out excessively, avoid harsh soaps and hot water, and use a good moisturizer after bathing.

The best moisturizers are alcohol-free and water-free. A petroleum jelly, for example, seals in your skin's natural moisture. Apply the moisturizer while your skin is slightly damp. If your skin is so dry that it itches, avoid spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol. Keep in mind, however, that itching can be a sign of a serious underlying condition. If itching persists, see your doctor.

Sun exposure

Stay out of the sun as much as possible, especially during the midday hours of 10 AM to 4 PM. Avoid tanning parlors and other artificial tanning methods.

Wear protective clothing when you are exposed to sunlight. Long sleeves, long pants, and a hat will shield your skin from much of the dangerous ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Sunglasses that filter UV-A and UV-B rays are important for preventing damage to your eyes.

Before you go outside, always use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or more to block the burning rays of the sun. To best block the aging rays of the sun, use a sunscreen that contains either zinc oxide or Parsol 1789. Apply it generously, and replace it after swimming or excessive sweating. If using a waterproof sunscreen, let it dry for 30 minutes before you get wet. You need sunscreen even on overcast days or when sitting in the shade. Winter outdoor activities, like skiing and hiking, also can expose you to high-intensity UV radiation.

If you are taking any medication, check with your physician before you spend time in the sun. Many drugs cause a photosensitivity that may lead you to burn quickly.

Skin cancer

If caught early enough, most cases of skin cancer are curable. Examine your skin thoroughly on a regular basis, and have a complete yearly skin examination by a doctor. If you've ever had skin cancer before, have a checkup every 6 months.

Watch for these warning signs:

- An open sore that lasts for 3 weeks or more
- An irritated, red area that is painful or itchy
- A smooth growth with an elevated border
- A pearly or translucent spot that resembles a mole—it can be red, pink, white, black, or brown
- A white or yellow area that resembles scar tissue.

The most common types of skin cancer, basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, don't usually spread throughout the body. But melanoma can spread rapidly and kill. The most common early warning sign of melanoma is a change in the shape, size, or surface texture of a mole.

For more information on skin cancer prevention, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the Internet.

www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dcpc/nscpep/skin.htm

Periodic skin self-examination

Preventing skin cancer is the best defense against the disease. But if a lesion should develop, it is almost totally curable if caught in the early stages. Periodic self-examination will aid in early recognition of any new or developing lesion.

The following method of self-examination, designed by the American Academy of Dermatology, will ensure that no area of the body is neglected. To perform your exam, you'll need a full-length mirror, a hand mirror, and a brightly lit room.

1. Examine your body front and back in the mirror, then your right and left sides with arms raised.
2. Bend your elbows and look carefully at your forearms and upper underarms and palms.
3. Next, look at the backs of your legs and feet, including the spaces between the toes and soles.
4. Examine the back of your neck and scalp with the help of a hand mirror; part your hair (or use a blow dryer to lift it), and get a close look.
5. Finally, check your back and buttocks in the mirror.

It helps to make a body map. Just outline the shape of your body on a piece of paper, and draw any moles or other lesions on your skin. Keep track, add dates, note any changes to existing moles, and list any new ones you have found. If you see any changes or have pain, call your doctor.

