

## Does Diet Really Affect Your Skin?

by Carol Stover

You've heard it before – “You are what you eat”. But few people realize how literally true that statement is.

Many dermatologists say that diet has little effect on skin and skin conditions. Modern holistic health practice is finally proving otherwise. We now know that skin reacts to everything going on inside and outside of the body, including hormonal changes, climate, medications, stress, sleep, ingredients in skin products, air quality and exposure to the elements. But the most profound improvement we can make in what we see in the mirror often depends on what's on our dinner plates.

Skin is not supposed to look the way it looks on most people. Skin should be smooth, healthy and soft, with an inner glow that comes through to the surface. This comes from the health of the inner body and its functions, all of which are supported and “fed” from the foods we ingest and the water we drink every day. If we do not receive enough proper hydration and nutrition, our organs throughout our bodies suffer and their functions are compromised. This is the beginning of disease and premature aging.

As the body's largest organ, skin has vital duties to perform. Not only does it provide a protective covering; it also regulates our temperature with perspiration, generates its own acid barrier to bacteria with natural oils, and (*most crucial of all*) excretes wastes and toxins from the body. So the skin is a detox organ, just like the liver and kidneys, and this elimination process is so critical to life that, if it were somehow prevented, death would result. Remember the movie “Goldfinger”? When the girl in the movie was completely painted gold, she died. Your skin takes in moisture, oxygen and nutrients through its surface, and excretes back out all types of waste products from your digestive and respiration processes. Everything you eat, drink, smoke, breathe and absorb comes out of your skin at some point. Think about someone you know who eats a lot of garlic or curry – you can often smell these things coming out of their pores.

This puts a whole new perspective on the idea of worrying about getting a pimple from eating a candy bar. Now that we know how important nutrition is to our skin and other organs, and how we affect our whole immune systems by what we eat, the question is --- So what do we eat?

Answer: The best quality foods possible. Everyone has individual likes and tolerances, which are best explored with specialists in nutrition and within the confines of one's own conscience. I am a firm believer in the superior health benefits provided by organic foods and free-range meats. The pesticides and herbicides commonly used on produce are filled with carcinogenic substances, and the hormones given to feed animals to alter their weight and growth cause increasingly disturbing hormone imbalances in humans who consume their meat. These chemicals in our food and water are a big source of skin issues such as blemishes, flakiness, inflammation and a dull, gray look to the complexion. “Junk in our food causes daily explosions on the face, and is stored in our organs for later problems”, says Dr. Kathy Ficek, R.N., N.D., a naturopathic doctor practicing in Perry Hall, MD. Stores like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods Markets have incredible selections of the various standards of organic and non-genetically modified foods, and the prices of these items are actually coming down due to increased consumer demand. Even the “regular” grocery stores now have organic and “natural” sections where you can find many of these items. Trust me, you will taste the difference.

And speaking of “Junk”, do I need to say that junk food is a big No-No? A candy bar won’t necessarily cause your skin to break out unless you have a sensitivity to chocolate or the waxes and chemicals used in cheaper versions. So if you must indulge, buy the best quality you can find and do so sparingly. (Yes, you can buy organic chocolate candy bars, and they are fabulous.) Excess sugar in the diet leads to a vicious cycle of hormonal swings, and that *can* make your face break out. Fast food is another problem, and it seems like the entire country lives on it. The next time you sidle up to the counter to order your big whatever and deep-fried accompaniment, take a good look at the skin of the teenager waiting on you. One reason why they look like that is because they eat there too.

How about Dairy? I may lose some friends on this one, but all the research I have done points to more problems than benefits with milk and other dairy products. Almost any skin problem (including acne, eczema and rosacea) can be improved simply by eliminating dairy from the diet. The growing link to classic allergy symptoms, worsening of asthma symptoms, increased mucous in the ear/nose/throat passages, colic in babies, ear infections in children, etc., should make people take a second look at drinking the breast milk of another animal. Cow’s milk proteins are apparently too complex for humans to effectively digest, and some estheticians think this causes those small fat deposits in the skin that defy extraction. Don’t worry about the calcium issue – there are plenty of other foods with calcium, like green leafy vegetables. Almost no one in this country eats enough fruits and vegetables, and they are great for skin and every other part of you.

Supplements are another great way to help your skin and overall health, because the loss of minerals in our soil is now well documented. Vitamin C, so easily depleted by stress and smoking, is the vitamin that feeds your own natural collagen. But vitamins and supplements are not all created equal, so beware of buying them at the grocery store or corner drugstore. Many cheaper versions contain added food by-products (leftover “junk” from food processing) to fill up their tableting base, according to Dr. Judi Valentine, Ph.D., a doctor of holistic nutrition practicing in Annapolis, MD., and the author of a new book on safe and sane weight management and nutrition. She says to look for those that state on the label “No starches, dairy, wheat, yeast, sugar, salt, preservatives, artificial colors or flavors”, all things which cause allergic reactions that can show up on skin. And if you have constipation problems, defined as fewer than 2 bowel movements a day (that’s right, I said day), then you are bound to have skin problems. Remember, the skin is the final step in the body’s elimination process. Increase that fiber and get a good colon cleanse product. Trained health consultants and naturopathic doctors can help you put together a good supplement program.

Finally, the substance that keeps it all flowing – Water. Most of us drink far below the 8-glass minimum that our bodies require just for basic, not optimal, functioning. Sodas contain an average of 9 teaspoons of sugar per serving, as well as substances which leach calcium from our bone tissues. Aspartame has even worse health implications, and is linked to symptoms mimicking lupus and multiple sclerosis. Coffee and tea in moderation are fine, (make sure all decaf products are Swiss water process decaffeinated only) but they do pull moisture from the body and dehydrate the skin. Dr. Ficek says, “At least 2/3 of the beverages you drink per day should be pure water”. Add some lemon or lime (natural) if you don’t like the taste. And drink filtered water, please.

If this all seems like too much change to take in, think of it this way: Nothing happens overnight. Your skin didn't get this way overnight, and it will take you a while to improve it. Speed up the process by improving the quality of the topical products you put on your skin (don't use mineral oil, petrolatum, wax based soaps, antibacterial soaps, animal by-products like lanolin & collagen). But you will see a difference, and sooner than you think. Just take a few positive steps each month until you see and feel a real transformation – inside and out.