

How your lifestyle affects your skin's appearance

Your lifestyle affects your health. You may not see the effects of the French fries and chicken wings you ate last night, though I can guarantee that there are cholesterol plaques forming in your arteries as I write this article. The skin is our body's largest organ, and because we can see it, the effects of our lifestyle habits and choices are clearly reflected back to us in the mirror every day.

The skin plays several roles. A major one is to protect your internal organs from the outside world. This includes both UV rays from the sun as well as infectious organisms on the outside trying to gain access to your inside. The skin also helps regulate your body temperature, by giving off heat through radiation directly from the surface of the skin, to sweating from local sweat glands.

Humans have been preoccupied with their appearance for centuries. Cleopatra was known to take regular milk and honey baths to keep her skin supple and silky smooth. The fact of the matter is that whether we like it or not, our appearance does play a large role in our success both personally and professionally. The old adage 'first impressions are lasting' still holds true today.

In the last decade, we have developed a battery of products and devices to improve our appearance. Lasers, peels and Botox all have their time and place, but prevention and a healthy lifestyle must go hand in hand with all of these treatments.

Obesity and the Skin

With weight gain, there is often insulin resistance. This ultimately leads to diabetes. Insulin resistance can manifest itself on the skin as symmetric, brown velvety patches. These brown patches are called *acanthosis nigricans* and they appear only on specific areas on the body: behind the neck, in the armpits and the groin, in the creases of the elbows and behind the knees, and on the tongue. People with *acanthosis nigricans*, also develop multiple skin tags.

The treatment is simple: lose weight. A 5% weight loss has actually been shown to reverse pre-diabetes and *acanthosis nigricans*. If there are any residual brown spots left after weight loss, these can be treated with a retinoid cream, which is a vitamin A derivative. Skin tags however need to be physically removed by a physician.

Smoking and the Skin

Cigarette smoking and exposure to second hand smoke increases your risk of cancer in just about every organ, it destroys your lung tissue and over time leads to a condition known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and it ages your skin. Smoking dehydrates the skin and it exposes it to a constant flow of damaging free radicals. If you compare the skin of identical twins, one who has been a smoker for 20 years and the

other who has never smoked, the smoker will look roughly ten years older due to the effects of smoking.

There are a million reasons to quit smoking. The problem is that it is an addictive substance and hence it's difficult to kick the habit. The good news is that there are a number of different ways to quit today, that are much easier than simply going cold turkey. There are medications available by prescription, nicotine replacement patches and gum that allow you to decrease your exposure gradually, hypnosis and government sponsored online programs to help BC residents. Speak to your doctor today.

Sun Exposure and the Skin

You don't need to burn to damage your skin from the sun. Daily exposure, even through the clouds is damaging. This is why it is important to wear sunscreen daily, with a minimum SPF of 15 and to ensure that it provides both UVA and UVB protection. Excessive sun exposure causes basal cell cancer, squamous cell cancer and melanoma. It also leads to thick leathery skin, freckles and wrinkles. The lifetime risk of developing basal cell skin cancer in BC is 1 in 7. Though sun exposure is necessary to form vitamin D, you only require about 10 minutes a day on your hands and face to produce your daily requirement. So be smart, wear sunscreen.