Your Guide to
SKIN CARE

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SKIN CARE

What is Skin?

Skin is the body's biggest organ. When people think of organs, most often the heart, lungs and brain come to mind but typically not the skin. Like these and other organs inside the body, skin is made up of different types of tissues and these tissues are made up of cells.

Much like the roof on a house, the skin plays an important role in protecting our bodies. It keeps bodily fluids inside while at the same time carefully controlling the release of waste product. It also helps keep our internal body parts safe from the potentially harmful effects of the environment including the sun, light and bacteria and also from injury.

Several different layers make up the skin, but perhaps because the underlying layers are not visible, they're not thought of very often. We spend much of our lives worrying about acne and wrinkles but don't realize that these types of skin issues have a lot to do with the workings of the layers below.

If you were to look at a cross-section of skin, you'd see that skin consists of 3 different layers: the epidermis, the dermis and the hypodermis or subcutis layer. Let's take a closer look at each.

**Epidermis**

This is the outermost layer of skin - the one that is visible. It covers the entire body, from the head down to the feet. The epidermis itself consists of 3 layers and is made up of tightly-woven connective tissues of varying thickness. For example, the skin covering your feet is much thicker than that below the eye. The epidermis acts like a barrier, keeping the good in and the bad out.

The top layer of the epidermis is constantly being shed. It's the layer that acts as the gatekeeper keeping fluids in and dangers out. Although not easily visible, most of this layer is covered with thousands of tiny pores and hair shafts. New skin is continually being generated by the bottom layer to replace the skin that has been shed. The epidermis also contains melanin, the cells responsible for skin pigmentation (coloring) and protecting against the sun's damaging rays.

**Dermis**

This layer of connective tissue tucked in between the innermost and outermost layers is the site of much activity. The dermis is home to blood vessels, lymph vessels, nerve tissue, hair follicles, bundles of collagen and sweat glands. Much activity happens in the middle layer. Blood vessels supply nutrients. Nerve tissues give skin the ability to feel. And the muscle tissues in this layer when they are activated are what cause a person to develop goose bumps in response to cold or fear. This layer also has the ability to trap bacteria that manages to penetrate the epidermis.
**Hypodermis or subcutis layer**

The innermost layer of skin helps to regulate our body temperature. It is here that insulating fat and collagen can be found which is why this layer helps keep us warm. This layer also acts as a cushion or shock absorber, protecting the body from injury. The connective tissue that makes up this important layer is also known as adipose tissue.

**Skin Types: Dry Skin**

Dry skin can be a blessing but more often it is troublesome. Those with dry skin generally need not worry about blemishes except for the occasional stray that appears from hormonal changes or stress. But dry skin looks dull and flaky. And worse, it can emphasize the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles.

Age and the environment are two factors that contribute to this skin type. Over time, the sebaceous glands within the dermis layer slow their production of sebum, the body's natural moisturizer. The skin's ability to retain moisture also lessens as we grow older. This is caused by the breakdown of the intracellular matrix, the collagen and elastin layer that helps hold skin tissue together. When this layer begins to break apart, it becomes more difficult for skin to hold in moisture. As moisture escapes, skin becomes drier.

Other causes of dry skin include climates that are arid, windy and dry. Use of harsh soaps and detergents and too much unprotected exposure to the sun's damaging rays can also negatively influence skin. Genetics plays a role as well.

**How do I know I have dry skin?**

First consider where you live. Windy areas and areas with low humidity cause dryness by stripping skin of its natural oils. Living in areas where winters are cold causes skin trouble as well. Even if you don't spend much time outdoors, interior heaters as well as air conditioning units in hot, dry climates can sap the air of moisture and cause dry skin.

Visible indicators of dry skin include skin that flakes easily. Plus, dry skin often looks tight and taut because pore openings are very tiny. If you don't yet see these tell-tale signs of dry skin but you're at or approaching mid-life, it's time to start looking.

**Caring for dry skin**

If you have dry skin, proper care involves retaining as much moisture as possible. One way is to avoid using products containing alcohol because alcohol dries. Recommended ingredients for dry skin include alpha hydroxy, lactic acids, petroleum, lanolin and glycerin so take time to read product labels.

Dry skin won't always feel like it needs to be cleansed, but it does, twice daily, morning and night. Using a gentle cleanser made especially for skin that's dry, cleanse using warm, not hot
water. Finish off with a cool rinse. It's never a good idea to use hot water to clean any type of skin or to soak in a tub because doing so will only strip skin of its natural oils.

After washing your skin, pat it dry using a soft towel. Then apply a light moisturizer. Those containing Vitamin E are excellent choices. If you wear make-up choose foundations that contain the moisturizing ingredients mentioned above.

Help keep skin hydrated by drinking water and increasing your consumption of high water content foods such as cucumbers and watermelon. Most fruits and vegetables are excellent hydrating foods plus they're excellent sources of important vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants. Antioxidants are crucial in helping maintain the skin's intracellular matrix.

Skin Types: Oily Skin

Of all the skin types, oily skin is often the most challenging. Oil production is completely natural and is the result of the sebaceous glands located in the dermis or middle layer of skin. These natural oils help keep skin moist and supple. But for some, the sebaceous glands produce too much oil, leading to the most dreaded of the skin types - oily skin.

How do I know I have oily skin?

Most teen-agers have oily skin because this is the time when hormone production is in full swing. But if you've passed your teen years, there are other ways of determining whether or not you have oily skin. It's fairly easy to detect, so start by looking in the mirror. Do you notice a sheen on your skin, especially in your 'T-Zone?' The T-Zone starts at the point between your eyes and extends vertically down along your nose all the way to your chin. The zone also runs horizontally across the bridge of your nose, starting and ending at the center point below each eye.

You may or may not notice the sheen during the day, so check again first thing after waking. If there's a sheen, chances are good you have oily skin. While you're standing at the mirror, take a look at your hair. If it's oily, it's another indication you likely have oily skin. If you wear make-up, specifically foundation, and you find it fades or wears off after a couple of hours, that's yet another indication of oily skin. If you're constantly patting your face with powder or even a handkerchief it's probably because of oily skin.

The presence of blemishes is another good indication although stress, hormones and other factors can all cause outbreaks. And remember that oily skin isn't found only on the face. The back, neck, chest, shoulders and arms can all be oily.

How to care for oily skin?

If you do have oily skin, you probably feel that the best way to combat it is to strip away those pore-clogging, sheen-producing oils. Don't! Although they cause trouble for your complexion, oils produced by the sebaceous glands are important because they act as the skin's natural moisturizer. And oily skin is sometimes sensitive. Rather than completely remove oil, you need to keep it under control.
Another reason not to use harsh soaps that strip away oil is that doing so may cause the sebaceous glands to increase their oil production. They'll instinctively want to replenish the lost oils and you may end up with a bigger problem.

You've got to keep oily skin clean so that pores openings remain clear. Otherwise, dead cells, dirt and other bacteria will clog pores and cause pimples. Skin is delicate so always use a gentle cleanser and warm, not hot water. Exfoliate weekly with a non-abrasive product to help remove any pore-clogging material or use a toner that does not list alcohol as an ingredient.

Use products that moisturize in moderation and according to directions. Make sure the cosmetics and sun protection you use are oil-free. Look for skin care products with the words 'non-comedogenic' or 'non-acnegenic' on the labels.

**Skin Types: Combination Skin**

Combination skin is a separate category of skin type. It's neither 100% dry or normal or oily. It's instead a combination that's characterized as normal and oily skin, or skin that's oily and dry. In other words, like the song, combination skin is 'a little bit of this, and a little bit of that'.

The common denominator in either type of combination skin is the presence of oily areas so care must be taken not to further aggravate these areas. Usually, it's the areas with the highest concentration of oil-producing glands – the face, chest, shoulders and the back - that are oily. Other body parts have fewer oil glands which is why they're either normal or have characteristics of dryness.

The cause of combination skin really has to do with oil-producing glands that produce more oil than normal. Dryness is primarily caused by the environment, age and the breakdown of the intracellular matrix.

Most people know whether they have combination skin just by looking at it. The areas that appear shiny likely will have some amount of pimples and/or blackheads. Makeup and other cosmetics usually won't last through an entire day without re-application. Dry areas flake and appear dull and may feel irritated.

**Skin care for combination skin**

Proper skin care for combination skin is best described as a delicate balancing act. You don't want to over-moisturize the oily areas, which mainly include the 'T-zone' or you risk waking up with an explosion of blemishes dotting your face. And likewise, you don't want to apply products formulated for oily skin to the areas that aren't oily or you risk waking up with skin that feels taut and scaly, especially around the eyes and mouth. So what's the proper way to care for combination skin?

Cleansing twice daily with warm water and a gentle gel cleanser is most important. This helps to remove dead skin cells, dirt and excess oil so they don't block pore openings. Follow with a toner that's either water-based or glycerin-based after cleansing to help remove remaining residue. Periodic exfoliating is recommended to remove any remaining dead cells so new skin
can take its place. It helps keep skin looking fresh and radiant. Be sure to look for skin care products that aim to balance the different skin types.

For oily-normal skin, you want to keep skin hydrated, but dry in the areas prone to excessive oil. Choose moisturizers that are water-based rather than oil-based, making sure to apply sparingly to oil-prone areas. Spot-treat blemishes as necessary. Benzoyl peroxide products are very effective. Apply cosmetics designed to absorb oils, like powders or dab with oil-absorbing tissues as necessary.

For oily-dry skin, moisturizing dry areas with emollient-based products is important to keep skin feeling fresh. The eyes may need an even heavier moisturizer and if so, just be sure to keep it away from the T-zone.

And never forget the importance of applying sunscreen. Fortunately, many foundations and powders now do double-duty as both make-up and sunscreen!

**Skin Aging and Wrinkles**

Skin aging and wrinkles are a person's two worst enemies. Although there is little one can do to prevent these tell-tale signs of aging, there are ways to delay their appearance. Skin begins the aging process almost from the moment you're born, so if you want to control skin aging and wrinkles, start early!

**Causes of skin aging and wrinkles**

Over time, the important skin components elastin and collagen start to break apart and skin begins to lose its elasticity, its underlying structure and its ability to spring back into shape. Cell reproduction slows with age causing fat cells and oil glands to atrophy. As this happens, production of emulsions designed to keep skin moist slows and skin starts to become dry. Add in the effects of gravity and soon the jowls, arms and eyelids begin to sag.

Several other environmental factors contribute to the onset of skin aging and wrinkles. Cigarette smoking, air pollution, laughing and frowning, and unprotected exposure to the sun all play a role. What's different about these environmental factors is that most are within a person's ability to control. So while there is no way (as of yet) to stop the aging process, the factors that contribute to its acceleration can be stopped.

Skin aging and wrinkling can be slowed by always protecting the skin from the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays. These rays can penetrate unprotected layers of skin. They produce radiation which can seriously and permanently damage the cells that form skin tissue. UVA rays are believed capable of releasing oxidants, unstable particles that cause extensive cell damage.

Cigarette smoking promotes the release of oxidants as well. Oxidants slow the production of new collagen and elastin. Known also as free radicals, the best way to protect against their negative effects is to consume a diet rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. Smoking also
restricts the blood flow in the epidermis so skin doesn't get the quantity of nutrients it needs to stay healthy.

The repetitive nature of cigarette smoking, specifically the repetitive contraction of the muscles surrounding the mouth, accelerates skin aging and wrinkling as do the muscle contractions that occur when laughing and frowning. Air pollution contributes to wrinkles by depriving the skin of Vitamin E, another important antioxidant.

**Skin care for anti-aging and wrinkles**

Keeping skin clean and moist is the best skin care regime for anti-aging and wrinkles. It's better than most of the higher-priced solutions that promise to end wrinkling. Wash with warm water and gentle cleaner and pat skin dry so some moisture remains. Hot water and harsh soaps deplete skin of essential oils and increase dryness. Also avoid products with dyes or perfumes which may further irritate skin. Gently remove eye makeup as the skin surrounding the eyes is very delicate and prone to wrinkling. And there you have it - simple, inexpensive skin care for anti-aging and wrinkles.

Aging is an unstoppable process and unfortunately, so are wrinkles. So protect your skin by living a healthy lifestyle. Eat right, exercise, don't smoke and avoid excess alcohol consumption.

**Rosacea**

Skin flushing and redness when you're not embarrassed are symptoms associated with rosacea, a chronic skin disorder that affects millions of individuals, primarily women. The condition doesn't usually appear until women reach their 30's or even later. Rosacea is thought to result from the accumulation over time of excess acid in the body. This accumulation irritates the blood vessels and since the facial area has some of the highest concentrations of blood vessels, it's the area most affected by rosacea.

**Symptoms of Rosacea**

Rosacea affects the face therefore its symptoms are difficult to miss. The main areas affected include cheeks and nose, but the forehead and areas around the mouth can also be involved. These areas have a large concentration of blood-carrying arteries which is why some people blame the cause of rosacea on excess acids.

Symptoms are characterized by patches of red, flush skin that may burn or sting or itch. In some cases, the skin will also become inflamed. There is no consistency among patients as to where on the face the patches will develop and whether they'll appear on one or both sides simultaneously. Skin type can be characterized by dry and flaky, or normal or oily.

Bumps and pimples are other symptoms of rosacea. Similar in appearance to acne, these skin blemishes are not the result of blocked pores. In fact, rosacea is frequently referred to
incorrectly as adult acne. And equally unfortunate, rosacea is often misdiagnosed as sunburn which often delays proper treatment.

**Causes of Rosacea**

An exact cause of rosacea has yet to be discovered and whether genetics is involved is a hotly debated topic. Many patients can state with certainty a blood relative who has or has had this chronic skin condition which is why some people think it's a hereditary condition. Patient analysis also indicates that fair-skinned persons and persons of Irish, English, Scottish, Scandinavian and Welsh descent seem to experience more instances of rosacea.

Other possible causes include bacteria, fungus and mites. Some attribute it to psychological factors and others claim there's some type of problem in the skin's connective tissues.

**Rosacea treatments**

Rosacea is definitely not infectious or contagious and the fact that antibiotics are sometimes prescribed to treat it causes confusion. This is done more for the anti-inflammatory capability of antibiotics not their bacteria fighting ability.

Sun screen is an absolute to avoid flare-ups must and so are skin care products formulated for sensitive skin.

There are several triggers known to cause rosacea to flare. People with rosacea can work at keeping it under control by avoiding the following environmental triggers: foods that are spicy, alcoholic beverages, weather that's hot or cold, beverages that have been heated, hot baths/saunas, strenuous exercise and stress that's caused by emotional swings.

In cases where redness is severe, laser therapy can be prescribed. The process helps remove the blood vessels that cause the redness. Dermabrasion can help smooth the bumps.

**Cellulite**

Cellulite is many things. It's unsightly. It's embarrassing. Cellulite is also controllable but not necessarily preventable and only as long as there's a willingness to implement dietary and lifestyle changes.

Everybody knows what cellulite looks like because it's so easily recognizable. It resembles the skin of an orange or worse, cottage cheese. It has a unique pattern and it generally appears on one of 3 parts of the body - the hips, the buttocks or the abdomen.

Cellulite is far more prevalent in women than in men. It varies in intensity from mild to extreme and, contrary to popular belief it's not at all a medical condition. It's simply the term used to describe the visible effect on the epidermis of excess fat deposits being stored just below its surface.
Causes of cellulite

Cellulite doesn't generally become an issue until the years preceding puberty. That's when a young girl's hormone levels surge and those hormones begin sending messages to various parts of the body signaling the need to begin changing. One of these changes involves the formation of a layer of fat within the innermost layer of skin called the subcutaneous fat layer.

During the manufacture of this fat layer, a patterned structure within this layer is created, the purpose of which is to contain stored fat. It is this pattern, or framework for fat storage, shaped somewhat like the letter 'X' that creates the dimpling effect when too much fat is stored and the fat deposits begin to bulge. The pattern that's created in a man's body is different. It's shaped more like column so even when there's excess fat being stored it's usually not visible in the same manner.

Normal levels of fat stored in this innermost layer of the subcutaneous won't create the external dimpling because there's enough space for all the fat deposits. So really, every woman has the tendency to develop some degree of cellulite when fat begins to accumulate.

How to treat cellulite

Clothing can cover the appearance of cellulite, but most people cannot remain in long pants all the time. You could spend hundreds of dollars trying hundreds of cellulite treatment products and not get anywhere close to the same results you'll get by treating cellulite naturally. Not with some herb or balm, but with diet and exercise. The only way cellulite will be less noticeable is by shrinking the size of the fat cells stored in the subcutaneous layer so they no longer bulge.

And contrary to what the marketers of these hundreds of cellulite treatment creams, lotions, wraps, pills and other procedures will tell you, a sensible diet that's heavy on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein and low in sodium and saturated fat will put you on the road to recovery. Combine moderate, regular exercise with the nutritious diet and do exercises that focus on the areas where cellulite appears like walking or biking. In a few months (or longer, depending on the severity of the cellulite) this embarrassing skin problem should be well under control.

Massage may help reduce cellulite because the motions help break down the stored fat deposits.

Eczema: What Is It?

Persistent, painful itching - that's how many patients describe eczema, a skin condition with many causes. To make it easier to understand eczema and the various symptoms and related treatments, eczema goes by a number of different names. Regardless of the underlying cause however, eczema always affects the epidermis, and it can affect any individual, regardless of genetics, racial background or age.
Classified into two broad categories, eczema that has no apparent trigger or cause is considered endogenous eczema. When eczema is the result of external triggers such as allergens, the eczema is classified as eczematous dermatitis.

Much still is unknown about eczema and one puzzling fact is that the available treatments for the various types of eczema aren't always effective for every individual.

The primary symptoms of eczema include the appearance of itchy red rashes. Sometimes blisters develop and they may seep fluids then crust over. Affected areas often become scaly and thick and sometimes there's even discoloration. Eczema can develop on any part of the body and there is no consistency in the length of time each flare-up will last. Eczema that develops in the folds of skin tends to be more irritating because of the constant rubbing.

The most serious risk associated with eczema is infection. Eczema is so itchy that affected individuals sometimes scratch the area until the top layer of skin has been broken. With the skin's ability to provide external protection from harmful bacteria compromised, bacteria can make its way into the damaged area and cause an infection.

It's advisable to keep fingernails trimmed short to decrease the damage that can be caused by constant scratching of affected areas. When children develop eczema, parents are often advised to place soft mittens over their hands to reduce the severity of the itching.

Although it can be troublesome, eczema is not contagious.

Eczema treatment will differ based on the type that has been diagnosed. NSAIDS, which are non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, naproxen and others, and corticosteroids, drugs that mimic the hormones produced naturally by the adrenal glands, are often prescribed to help reduce the inflammation associated with eczema. Benzocaine can also help reduce inflammation when applied topically. In some cases, antihistamines are prescribed.

Calamine lotion is effective at soothing the affected area, helping to keep it dry and protected. Another treatment aimed to soothe is application of wet bandages. Dermatologists often suggest use of cotton clothing and bedding as this natural fiber cools skin and allows it to breathe.

Shampoos and ointments that contain coal tar additives can help patches of red, itchy skin decrease in size. Finally, eczema that is considered severe is sometimes treated with UV lights.

**Forms of Eczema**

Let's take a closer look at some of the more common forms of eczema.

Atopic eczema is associated with a family history of allergies. It's considered an inherited form of eczema since the majority of people with atopic eczema themselves have problems with allergies or they have relatives who suffer from allergies, asthma or hay fever. Atopic eczema usually first appears during infancy and it flares and subsides regularly throughout life.
Seborrheic eczema is very often misdiagnosed as 'dry skin'. This common type of eczema is not at all associated with dry skin. It's actually believed to be somehow related to genetics, although the relationship has yet to be defined. The symptoms of seborrheic eczema include scaly skin that usually appears on top of the head and around the eyebrows, ears and nose, however, it can also appear on the chest.

It seems to be a skin condition that more often affects men than women and it doesn't usually become a problem until after puberty. After that however, seborrheic eczema flares frequently. Interestingly, it also appears in patients with some forms of mental or neurological issues such as mental retardation and Parkinson's disease.

To treat seborrheic eczema on the head, wash daily with shampoo that contains tar, salicylic acid, sulfur or selenium. For skin, apply hydrocortisone cream. Systemic antibiotics are sometimes prescribed as well.

Cradle cap is a form of seborrheic eczema that affects infants. It's easy to diagnose by the appearance of patches of thick, yellowish scales atop an infant's head. It sometimes appears in the diaper area, neck, face and behind ears, too. It's harmless and goes away quickly when treated. Use shampoo formulated for infants, then after shampooing, lightly massage and brush scalp with a soft brush. If it doesn't improve, it's important to seek medical advice.

Varicose eczema is caused by poor circulation usually due to obesity, menopause and pregnancy. This type of eczema most often appears on the lower leg area around the ankles. Symptoms don't usually appear until mid-life. It's important to treat this type of eczema otherwise the affected areas of skin could break down and form ulcers. Steroid creams and emollients are effective treatments.

The discoid type of eczema is characterized by round patches the size of coins appearing on the lower part of the legs, arms and the trunk. The patches are itchy and they sometimes weep. Discoid eczema seems to have no apparent trigger and usually develops suddenly and mostly in older men.

Contact dermatitis is another form of eczema that develops when irritants come into contact with skin. It results in localized inflammation in the area where contact occurred. It results from exposure to toxic chemicals rather than allergens, either just once or after several such contacts. A one-time exposure, usually to highly toxic chemicals, is considered an acute case and can cause red, thick, scaly skin.

A cumulative case is far more common and results from repeated exposure to any number of milder irritants such as laundry detergents, soap and even urine or saliva. Continual exposure only prolongs the problem. Dry, red skin that is thick and cracks and sometimes has papules is the result of this form of eczema, which is also hard to treat.
Psoriasis

Affecting approximately one out of every 50 adults, psoriasis is a physical condition that can cause significant psychological distress. One of the most interesting discoveries related to psoriasis is that its onset is rooted in the body's immune system.

The symptoms associated with a flare-up of psoriasis include skin that is salmon-colored, scaly, flaky and irritated. With plaque psoriasis, the most common form, affected areas develop round-, oval- or irregularly-shaped patches of red that are covered with skin that's scaly and silver-colored. There is no consistency in the size or shape of the patchy areas and in fact, several small patches can merge together and appear as one big irregular shape of irritated skin. These areas are unsightly and sometimes they crack and cause bleeding.

Affected skin can be extremely itchy and frequently has a burning sensation. Like the shape, there is no consistency in how long a flare-up will last. It can last 20 days or it can last 120 days or longer. What's worse for those affected is that it's a chronic condition so recurring flare-ups can happen any time.

The most commonly affected parts of the body include the trunk, head, elbows and knees although any body part can develop psoriasis. Flare-ups also tend to be symmetrical, meaning that both sides of the body will experience flare-ups in the same areas at the same time.

Genetics plays some role in psoriasis so those individuals with parents or grandparents who have had psoriasis have an increased chance that they'll develop it as well. For reasons still unknown, T-cells, which are needed to produce the white blood cells that help our bodies fight infection, cause the skin to become inflamed. T-cells also somehow trigger the production of an overabundance of skin cells. With nowhere else to go, these excess skin cells pile up on top of one another and create the telltale appearance of raised patches on the skin's exterior. The red appearance is the increased blood supply that's needed to nourish these skin cells.

Injuries to the skin, sunlight and streptococcal infections are common triggers of Psoriasis. Stress can also trigger an outbreak as can changes in hormone levels. Individuals with early stages of HIV seem to have higher instances of psoriasis as well.

Psoriasis is not contagious so there's no risk of passing it on. Those who smoke cigarettes and who consume alcohol increase their risks of developing psoriasis.

Currently, there still is no cure for psoriasis. However there are many treatments that are effective at alleviating the symptoms. Start by keeping affected areas moist and by resisting the temptation to scratch the area.

Topical treatments are used first with the goal of slowing down the excess production of skin cells. Coal tar, salicylic acid, corticosteroids, synthetic vitamin D, tazarac and anthrallin are common topical treatment options as are specially-formulated bathing products and moisturizers. Systemic medications are prescribed to treat more severe cases. Phototherapy, where patients are exposed to medically-supervised ultraviolet radiation is also effective in treating psoriasis.
Natural Ingredients or Synthetic: Which are Better for Your Skin?

Can you really believe everything you read? When it comes to selecting skin care products, the answer might surprise you. A debate rages on as to whether products containing all natural ingredients are really better than those containing synthetic ingredients. With both sides of this issue taking a firm stand, and publishing 'official' report after report, it is the consumer who most often becomes lost in the maze of unfounded marketing promises and supposedly 'guaranteed' results.

Are skin care products with natural ingredients better?

This seems to be the million-dollar question, literally. Skin care product manufacturers right now are spending millions of dollars researching everything from alfalfa to yucca in an attempt to not only gain a competitive edge, but to grab more of consumers' dollars.

With marketing departments working overtime, manufacturers of skin care products work hard to cleverly combine catchy phrases, attention-grabbing packaging and testimonials from 'experts' in the field of natural product research and development. The end results of these efforts are expensive moisturizers, cleansers, shampoos, masks, exfoliants and cosmetics that claim to work miracles on your skin, safely, and most importantly, naturally.

But are these claims true? Once again, that depends on which side of the fence you're on when it comes to supporting natural products versus synthetic products. Before you take a side on this hotly contested issue, there's one very important fact that you need to know.

The federal government has yet to define guidelines and regulations governing use of the term, 'natural'. That means marketers can use the term any way they choose, irregardless of the ingredients used in their products or the manufacturing processes used to produce those products.

Although a skin care product might very well contain natural products like aloe or vitamin E, what you're not being told is that the processes used to extract these components often utilize many synthetic materials. And even once natural ingredients are extracted, they're usually combined with synthetic products such as preservatives and stabilizing agents that help prolong shelf life.

One of the biggest risks involved with using natural ingredients is the potential for an allergic reaction. Lots of people have food allergies, so putting products containing plants or plant extracts on their skin may increase the risks of an allergic reaction. And even if a full-blown allergic reaction doesn't occur, natural ingredients often cause skin irritation and/or sensitivity.

Focus more of your attention on putting natural ingredients into your mouth and not onto your skin. One thing everyone can agree on is that eating a diet loaded with antioxidants and vitamins is extremely beneficial to healthy skin. The body is very efficient at processing natural foods and using the blood stream to transport these nutrients to the skin.

Find a skin care product line you trust and that works well with your skin type. Then become a loyal customer of that product line. Your skin will be happier as a result.
An Introduction to Sun Protection

Sun protection isn't just for sissies. Protection from the sun's damaging rays is important for anyone who wants to grow old gracefully. It's also an absolute must for anyone who wants to limit his or her risk of developing skin cancer.

People are finally beginning to realize that although sunshine is an important component of most outdoor activities and a great mood enhancer, excessive exposure can lead to much unpleasantness. A painful sunburn is the most immediate consequence of excess exposure. Long term, excess exposure can damage the skin making it prone to wrinkling and worse, the development of skin cancer.

When do you need sun protection?

Doctors will tell you that sun protection is needed all the time and they're right. Realistically however it's important anytime you'll be outdoors between the hours of 10:00 am and 3:00 pm, when the sun is at its highest.

People don't realize that they can still burn even though the sun isn't shining. Overcast days are some of the worst times for being in the sun unprotected. And because ultraviolet rays can reflect off certain surfaces, people need protection from the sun when snow covers the ground and also when in the water, when lying or playing on the sand and even when on a cement or grass surface.

Understanding UV rays

Ultraviolet rays are the different wavelengths of energy that are produced by the sun. Even though harmful, the sun's energy is necessary to all human life. Fortunately, as life on earth has evolved so has the capacity to tolerate UV rays. The most important protection against the damaging ultraviolet rays is the ozone layer - a layer in the stratosphere that absorbs most of the various types of UV rays before they reach the earth's surface.

Most of this radiation or energy from the sun is invisible to the naked eye. The fact that the radiation is mostly invisible is likely the reason why the sun can be so harmful. It's hard to convince a person to protect against something that can't be seen. Of the ultraviolet rays, the two that are responsible for skin damage are UVA and UVB rays. The sun also generates UVC rays, but fortunately these extremely damaging rays cannot penetrate the ozone layer and therefore pose no threat to humans.

The longer and more prevalent of the two, UVA rays are responsible for long-term skin damage because they absorb deep into the skin. Their strength remains uniform regardless of the time of day or time of year. UVB rays are shorter and are what causes skin to tan or sunburns. Our bodies need UVB rays to produce Vitamin D, an important vitamin. Their strength varies based on time of day, time of year, altitude and also distance from the equator.

The UV Index is a scale measuring from 0 - 11 (low to extreme) and it's used to determine the intensity of the sun's radiation, particularly the likelihood that skin will or will not redden when exposed to the sun for various periods of time.
Tanning and Burning

Tanning and burning are two intentional or unintentional consequences of being out in the sun. Most people willingly seek out the healthy glow that sun can produce. Yet two people, spending the same amount of time exposed to the same sun intensity often will come home with far different results. Why is it that one might come home in agony while other comes home looking sleek and glamorous?

The answer has a lot to do with a person's skin type. Other factors can influence the end result such as taking certain prescription medications and using certain types of skin care products, so let's take a closer look.

When skin is exposed to the sun without adequate sun protection, the exposure causes melanin, the pigment in the body that gives skin its color, to rise to the surface of the skin. One of the roles melanin plays is protecting skin from the sun. People with light or fair skin have less melanin whereas people with dark complexions obviously have more melanin. Since melanin protects the skin from the sun, it makes sense then that those with less melanin have less protection and vice versa. Darker-skinned individuals tan more often than they burn, but not always.

Because a burn takes a few hours to develop, most people don't realize they may be burning. They might not reapply sunscreen or cover up if they're not feeling burned. Unfortunately, it's usually not until later that they realize just how bad the situation is.

What to do when you get sunburned?

In addition to the embarrassing skin color you get from sunburns, there will be other symptoms. You might feel nauseous and dehydrated, and dizzy or light-headed. After a few days, sunburned skin will begin to peel and unlike what many people think and hope, sunburned skin will not develop into a tan.

There isn't much you'll be able to do to alleviate the above symptoms of sunburn. You'll definitely want to put on minimal, loose-fitting clothing as any rubbing against the burn will be painful. A pain reliever such as aspirin or acetaminophen will help minimize pain and discomfort. Keeping the body cool is the best thing for sunburns so fill a tub with cool or tepid water and soak. And promise yourself that next time, you'll use sun protection!

Do not immerse your body in a tub full of vinegar or rub the burn with butter. These remedies have been around for years but they're not effective ways to treat sunburns. In fact, it's often advised not to apply lotions or creams because you never know whether the product will intensify the pain or relieve it. And some products, including butter, might trap the heat and cause more discomfort.

If the sunburn is accompanied by blisters, you may have a severe second-degree burn. Blistering is normal after a few days but right away it's usually a sign that the sunburn is bad. In this case, it's advisable to seek medical attention right away.
Sun Protection Factor

So many different types of sun protection products are available that the choices are mind-boggling! Take a look next time you're shopping and you'll find sun protection products that are waterproof and sweat proof. Some are designed especially for infants and others are specially-formulated for athletes. Sun protection products are available as creams, lotions, oils, tanners and bronzers.

But what's with those numbers? The sun protection factor, or the SPF, ranges from a low of 2 to a high of 50 and sometimes higher. Most of us understand that the SPF has something to do with providing protection from the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays. But beyond that, the number is shrouded in mystery.

What does SPF mean?

The SPF is a comparison of the time it takes before the skin will start to redden with and without sun protection. In addition, SPF pertains only to UVB rays, the ones that cause tanning but also sunburns.

For example, if it would take 20 minutes for an individual's skin to burn without sun protection, then a SPF of 15 means that when applied, that person can remain in the sun 15 times longer, or up to 5 hours, without worrying about burning. The greater the SPF, the longer the protection it offers, but only up to a certain point. SPFs greater than 15 offer only small increments of additional protection. And that's the theory behind the SPF.

In reality though, sun protection regardless of SPF becomes less effective when it's not evenly applied, a person goes into the water and a person sweats. Both water and sweat diminish the product's effectiveness that's why it's extremely important to reapply sun protection frequently.

Besides reapplying, for maximum effectiveness the first application should happen approximately 20 minutes prior to going out into the sun. Doing so allows sufficient time for the product to fully absorb into the skin. It also ensures that you'll be protected the moment you step outside.

Which SPF is right for me?

For most people, sun protection with a sun protection factor of 15 provides adequate protection as long as it's frequently reapplied. However, those with more sensitive skin will benefit from a higher SPF. People who are fair-skinned, have light-colored or red hair or who are traveling to certain high altitude or tropical destinations will also benefit from a higher SPF. Those with darker skin generally don't burn as easily and need only a mild SPF. When choosing remember that a higher SPF does not offer more protection - it offers longer protection.

Other sun protection products

Self-tanning products and bronzers are safer ways to color your skin because the skin isn't being exposed to ultraviolet radiation which over time damages the skin's cells. These products don't offer sun protection unless the label specifically states otherwise by listing a sun
protection factor. But remember that a sun protection factor corresponds to a period of time and therefore, even if the product offers sun protection, it's not going to last until you wash the product off in a few days.

**Tips for Providing Maximum Sun Protection**

When applied according to the product's instructions, sun screens provide maximum protection from the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays. Always be sure to choose a SPF (sun protection factor) that offers the maximum protection for your skin type. But remember that no product will work if you fail to apply it every time you go outside.

The sun can reflect off many different surfaces including snow and cement and UV rays are present even on cloudy days. With these facts in mind, the best way to provide maximum sun protection is to develop a habit of applying your sun protection products whenever you go outside, reapplying them as often as necessary.

**Sun protection - more than skin deep**

One thing you'll realize about most sun protection products is that they're not formulated for all body parts. They're great at protecting the skin, but what about the eyes, lips and hair? The sun can cause serious damage to the eyes and has been associated with the development of cataracts.

The lips too are extremely delicate and they'll easily burn if not protected from the sun. Lips that are dry and chapped neither look good nor feel good. Applying a product containing zinc offers maximum sun protection. Lip balms, conditioners and lipsticks that have a SPF of at least 15 are also good choices.

The sun can damage hair, too. We sometimes don't realize this because we don't 'feel' the effects. But we can see the effects. Dry, dull, frizzy hair doesn't only result from excess chemical processing. Sun damages hair and harsh pool chemicals and salt only worsen the problem.

**Other types of sun protection**

Sun protection doesn't always come in a bottle. Protective clothing, hats and sunglasses are all just as important in blocking the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays. So is seeking shade whenever possible. Here's a rundown on other types of sun protection.

Some clothing manufacturers now produce a protective clothing line with a UPF or ultraviolet protection factor. Designed for those who spend a lot of time outdoors such as golfers, hikers, fishers, kayakers and others, these clothes are stylish and functional. You'll find protective clothing for all members of the family, including infants. Even if you can't find or afford clothing with UPF, tightly woven fabrics and dark colors are effective at blocking out the sun's harmful rays. And dry clothing blocks out more UV rays than do wet. Of course, long sleeves and pants offer maximum sun protection, but who wants to wear that much clothing when out in the sun?
Hats protect hair, eyes, face and the tips of ears. Wide brims offer the most protection and will actually help cool you off. Sunglasses are an absolute must when outdoors. When selecting a pair, make sure the label specifically states that the lenses offer UV protection otherwise they'll be useless. As a general rule, the bigger the lens, the more sun protection. Wrap-around styles offer the most protection because they block sun that can hit the eyes from the sides. And they're trendy too!

Winter Versus Summer Skin Care

Just as your body needs different clothing to protect it against the changing weather, your skin needs a different skin care regime to properly protect it from the elements. As the body's largest organ, skin is far more delicate than you probably realize. Here is a closer look at how winter versus summer affects skin and its care.

Why is skin care different in winter than in summer months?

Winter months generally are colder and drier than summer months when heat and humidity levels are on the rise. When skin is exposed to the harsh winter weather, it takes a beating, becoming excessively dry, irritated and chapped. Clothing protects most skin but we often fail to protect our faces. Moving indoors isn't any better. Constantly running heaters and dehumidifiers sap every bit of moisture from the air.

During the summer, temperatures warm and more skin becomes exposed to the elements. Higher temperatures and humidity levels increase the amount of sweat the body produces in an attempt to cool off. As an unintentional consequence, skin becomes oilier and more prone to pimples and other irritation. Swimming is great way to cool off however exposure to harsh pool chemicals and salt water can lead to excessive dryness.

Tips for protecting skin during the winter months

Apply sunscreen regularly because you're just as likely to sunburn in the winter as you are in summer. Apply a sunscreen, moisturizer or make-up with a minimum SPF of 15. Be sure to protect lips by wearing lipstick or lip balm with sun protection. Stop licking lips!

Moisturize. Add moisture to inside air by turning on a humidifier. If you don't have one, place a pan of water near radiator or heat source. Plants help moisturize the air. Add moisture to your body by using emollient-based soaps, lotions and creams.

Take shorter, warmer showers and baths. Hot water strips away natural oils as does staying submerged in water. Adding moisturizers to bath water helps, but take care when exiting as tub will be slippery.

Reduce the number of times you apply toner after cleansing and use toners with no or low alcohol levels. Gently exfoliate using a washcloth or scrub to remove dead skin cells and stimulate skin.
**Tips for protecting skin during summer months**

Always protect your skin from the effects of ultraviolet radiation by applying sunscreen, wearing sun protective clothing, and seeking shade whenever possible. Stay out of the sun when it's strongest, between 10:00 am and 3:00 pm.

Excessive sweat and oils clog pores so use a cooling cleanser containing salicylic acid to keep skin blemishes under control. Cleansers made with eucalyptus or menthol extracts feel good and help keep pores clean and open.

Change your moisturizing products because skin doesn't need as much moisturizing protection during summer as it does during winter.

Always rinse your body with cool water after swimming to remove chlorine and salt.

A facial mask applied once a week will deep-clean pores and help skin retain its natural pH balance. Use a mister to keep skin cool and moist.

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**Women's Skin Care**

All skin care is not created equally! Women's skin care differs from that of children and men, and among women, skin care even differs at various stages of life.

A woman's appearance on the outside is generally a good indication of what's going on inside her body. Poor nutrition, unhealthy lifestyle choices and stress all contribute to the overall poor health of the skin. Bad habits such as smoking and consuming high-fat, high-salt diets deprive the body of the important nutrients skin needs.

Although they don't shave their faces, women do shave other body parts, including parts that are very sensitive. Extra care should be taken to avoid further skin irritation, cuts or ingrown hairs.

Women have a tendency to retain water, causing skin to look and feel more bloated. To keep water retention under control, it's important for women to limit the amount of salt in their diets.

Men are gaining ground but still, women are more likely to undergo skin treatment procedures. Augmentation, dermabrasion and laser treatments all will change the skin's appearance but too much will ultimately wreak havoc. Always weigh the risks versus the benefits before 'going under the knife'.

Besides emotional ups and downs, wildly fluctuating hormones during pregnancy and menopause can cause changes in a woman's skin.

**Skin care during pregnancy**
Take a look at the products you use to ensure they're safe during pregnancy. Should you have any concerns, purchase products which are labeled safe to use during pregnancy.

Pregnancy can cause normal skin to become oily so you may have to change to skin care products that combat acne. Use toners and exfoliate to remove dead cells and deep clean pores. Continue to moisturize skin, especially your growing belly, to reduce chances of developing stretch marks.

Your feet are getting an extra workout so be sure to massage with a foot lotion containing refreshing menthol. Pigmentation sometimes changes during pregnancy, increasing the likelihood of sunburn/tan. Never forget to wear sunscreen to protect against damaging skin.

**Skin care during menopause**

Fluctuations in a woman's progesterone and estrogen levels will cause skin to change. Facial hair may sprout and skin will start to sag, wrinkle and thin. It's also drier due to slowed production of sebum. Interestingly, changing hormone levels may cause a new round of acne! Random dark spots and broken blood vessels will likely appear.

To counter the effects of dry skin, add humidity into the air, take shorter and warmer baths or showers and moisturize. Risks of skin cancer now increase so closely monitor moles and other skin discolorations. Most importantly, be vigilant about proper sun protection.

**Sensitive Skin Care**

Contrary to what you might have heard, sensitive skin isn't considered a medical condition. When someone says he or she has sensitive skin, it typically means the skin has become irritated, red, swollen and/or itchy as a result of either an environmental condition or use of a certain product. The term is also used to describe changes to a person's skin in response to allergic reactions.

**Why can skin be sensitive?**

Although there are several reasons why skin can be sensitive, the most common is that skin is reacting negatively to a certain product or possibly some combination of products. Think about your daily skin care regime, specifically the number of products you use. Soaps, cleansers, toners, blemish reducers, blemish concealers, foundation, blush, facial masks, after shave lotion - the list never ends! You probably use products that are made by a number of different manufacturers, too. While your intentions are good, some skin cannot tolerate such an assault.

**Causes of sensitive skin**

Trying to pinpoint the cause of sensitive skin is not always as simple as discontinuing use of a certain product. Because of the nature of sensitive skin, it can take hours or even days before the signs of sensitivity are visible. And the sensitivity may not be caused by a product. Exposure
to the sun can create skin problems, as can extremely hot water. Your laundry detergent, fabric softeners, shampoo, perfume, hair spray, and even the household cleaning products you use can be the culprit. Certain foods and even some plants can cause symptoms of an allergic reaction as well.

Healthy skin is less sensitive because it's able to act as an effective barrier. Sunburned skin, skin that's excessively dry and skin that is otherwise damaged tends to be more sensitive. That's one reason why people who don't normally have sensitive skin develop skin sensitivity during winter months when dry, cold air strips skin of its protective moisture.

**How to treat sensitive skin**

Before sensitive skin can be treated, it's important to figure out the underlying cause of the problem. It may be necessary to seek the advice of a dermatologist as you may have a skin condition such as eczema, psoriasis or rosacea. Here are some tips for treating sensitive skin.

Start reading product labels - the fewer ingredients, the better. Avoid products containing alcohol, fragrances, botanicals, antibacterial, ethanol and propylene glycol.

Spot test new facial products before applying to entire face. Apply a few dabs behind ears for 5 days, and if there's no reaction, apply beside eyes for another 5 days. If all goes well, full facial coverage likely will be safe.

Choose natural fabrics for pillowcases and washcloths like 100% cotton or silk instead of synthetic materials. Check your 'cotton' balls, too. Some look like cotton but really are polyester.

Eat a balanced diet to ensure skin gets the nutrients it needs to remain healthy.

Keep skin moist and always apply sun protection.

Gently clean skin. Avoid harsh products like scrubbing mitts, excessively hot water and abrasive exfoliating products.

**Men's Skin Care**

A booming industry, men's skin care is finally making its way to the top of the agenda. Whether it's something men are doing to help remain competitive or to help ward off the signs of growing old, men of all ages and all walks of life are starting to care about using the right types of products for their skin type.

Men's skin differs from women's in that it contains a higher percentage of collagen and elastin, so it's thicker. Men's sebaceous glands also work harder than a woman's meaning that men's skin generally is oilier.

Real men are concerned with skin care
Besides all the regular enemies of skin like the sun, poor diet and cold weather, men's skin needs protection from the razor blade. Daily removal of facial hair requires the application of vitamin-rich shaving gel to protect skin from rashes and burns that sometimes result from shaving.

If you want to avoid having your appearance referred to as 'weather beaten' you had better start protecting your skin from the sun. Sunburns aren't sexy and neither are the signs of premature aging. If surfers are man enough to walk around with heavy white zinc on their noses and lips, then you can be man enough to apply sunscreen when you're outdoors golfing, fishing, working or playing.

**General guidelines for men's skin care**

Begin the day by deep-cleaning your face to remove dirt and sweat. Cleanse again before going to bed.

Exfoliate to remove dead skin cells and other pore-blocking grime. Exfoliating also will open your pores and that's going to ensure a closer shave.

Before shaving, splash your face with warm water. That will make it easier to work up a good lather and it will soften skin. Take a few extra moments to really massage in the shaving cream. The massaging action will help stimulate blood flow in the dermis. Never use a dull blade to shave. And to ensure a close shave, always shave in the same direction as hair growth. Shaving in the opposite direction or shaving in both directions can leave you with skin that's red and irritated. Finally, take your time when shaving. Even though you've done it most of your life, you still need to be careful.

Moisturizing is important to help skin seal in moisture. Plus, many shaving products dry skin. Choose moisturizing products that also condition skin such as those that contain vitamins or aloe vera.

It's important to use after shave products that don't contain alcohol. It's too harsh and it'll dry skin which is opposite of what you want.

Remember that your face isn't the only part of your body that's covered with skin. Keep all skin clean and moist, especially on your feet, elbows, arms and your hands. Soft hands are nice to hold.

And finally, live the good life. Eat right, exercise moderately, don't smoke, and limit your intake of alcoholic beverages, all of which help keep skin healthy. That's the part of men's skin care you don't often hear much about.
Baby Skin Care

Baby skin care is more about preventing diaper rash than preventing acne, but nonetheless, it's an important topic. People don't often think about the need to care for a baby's skin, perhaps because it's so perfect. Few things feel more soft and supple. Proper baby skin care can mean the difference between a happy baby and one that's constantly complaining.

Besides diaper and heat rash, babies can develop a condition called 'cradle cap'. Baby skin dries easily and it can even sunburn because melanin production is low. And because of the surge in hormones at the time of birth, babies can break out in acne, although baby skin is far less oily than an adult's.

General guidelines and tips on baby skin care

Start life off right by protecting your baby from ultraviolet exposure. Keep infants out of direct sunlight during the first few months. If you do go outside, be sure to cover the baby's skin with protective clothing, a hat and baby sunglasses. Turn that into a habit and teach your child the importance of doing so as he or she grows older. Sunscreen products shouldn't be applied until the baby is 6 months old, but after that, they're absolutely necessary. Take care when riding in cars and when out for a stroll.

As for baby skin care, it won't be hard to find products formulated especially for babies. Purchase these and use as directed. Adult skin care products are not recommended for babies. They're far too harsh. You may have to switch laundry detergents if you find the one you're using is irritating your baby's skin.

Always change diapers as soon as possible. Urine and feces contain bacteria and must be washed away with warm water or baby wipes, otherwise infections can develop. Make sure wipes don't contain alcohol which can dry out a baby's skin. Remember to clean in the folds and also to dry this area gently but thoroughly. Diaper rash is very uncomfortable so apply an ointment or cream formulated especially for this common baby skin problem.

Moisturizing regularly with lotions and creams formulated for infants helps retain moisture. Excessive bathing isn't necessary and in fact can sap a baby's skin of moisture. Never use hot water for bathing. Like adults, babies prefer warm water. If your baby has cradle cap which resembles scaly dirty-looking skin, gently scrub top of head with a soft brush. If cradle cap doesn't go away, have the baby's physician take a look. Wind and cold can also cause dry skin so protect your baby when outside. If the air in your home is dry, consider getting a humidifier to add moisture.

Because a baby's skin doesn't yet perspire properly, babies aren't efficient at controlling their body temperatures. Sometimes, heat rashes can develop. Be sure to dress babies in comfortable, loose-fitting clothing that's appropriate for the temperature to avoid these rashes that resemble red patches or pinkish-red bumps.

Good habits begin early and it's never too soon to develop a proper baby skin care routine!