

The new clear-skin diet

As scientists do more and more research, they're discovering that your best complexion really does depend on what you do—and don't—eat. Here's how to make nutrition your most powerful beauty product.

By KRISTA BENNETT DEMAIO



Lately, the pros in lab coats have been taking another look at how eating affects your skin, and the results are overturning decades-old advice. “When I was doing my training, all of my textbooks said that food had no effect on acne,” says Whitney Bowe, M.D., a dermatologist in New York City, who wasn’t so convinced. A few years ago, after poring over tons of studies on nutrition and skin, Dr. Bowe and her colleagues determined that there was enough evidence to suggest that certain foods do, in fact, make skin react, and they started publishing their discoveries. For instance, several studies showed that consuming milk, especially the fat-free kind, was associated with an increase in blemishes (the science as to why is still being unraveled, though theories blame hormones and specific milk proteins). And that’s just one diet-skin link. Get the latest intel and you can structure meals to bring you your best complexion.

Your skin can get carb-stressed

There’s growing evidence that the blood sugar spike you get from refined carbohydrates is messing with your skin’s firmness, making it more wrinkly. “When you eat foods that are high in sugar, the sugar breaks down into glucose molecules. Those molecules in your bloodstream attach themselves to the collagen and elastin fibers in your skin and make them less flexible,” explains dermatologist Jessica Wu, M.D., the author of *Feed Your Face*, a guide to eating for good skin. “This ‘glycation’ process also interferes with your skin’s ability to form new, strong collagen and elastic tissue.” On the surface, the net effect eventually plays out as an increase in lines and sagging.

In a recent report in the *Journal of Drugs in Dermatology*, Dr. Bowe and her team called out these

same refined carbohydrates as the leading dietary contributors to acne. Essentially, foods such as white pasta, white bread, french fries, pretzels, chips, and sugary snacks have what is called a high glycemic index (HGI), which sets off a rapid surge in blood sugar and insulin levels in the body. “This leads to a cascade of responses, including the elevation of insulin-like growth factor 1, a hormone that then causes an increase in oil production, plugging follicles,” Dr. Bowe explains. The study found that when people ditched HGI foods and adopted a low-glycemic meal plan, their acne improved significantly over a 10- to 12-week period.

The research is so compelling that many dermatologists have made a low-carb diet part of their antiacne prescription. Eric Schweiger, M.D., a dermatologist

SMARTER CARBS

Produce, not pretzels, is comfort food for skin; fruits pack nutrients without the refined carbs.

in New York City, gives his pimple-prone patients a food pyramid he developed based on these findings. At the tippy-top: the aforementioned HGI foods we should eat sparingly, such as sweets and breads. The remaining two-thirds are full of low-glycemic vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. “Eliminating foods that release glucose too quickly can help you get clear skin,” Dr. Schweiger says.

You need to feed on antioxidants

You’ve heard about free radicals—the oxidized molecules, unleashed by UV rays, pollution, and other environmental factors, that wreak havoc on healthy skin cells and cause your skin’s surface to age. Derms have known for a while now that your defense against these molecules is to pump up the antioxidants within the uppermost layer of your skin by applying products containing vitamins such as A, C, and E, which break down the troublemakers before they can do damage. But experts are unearthing something new about these crucial antioxidants: It seems acne sufferers naturally tend to have lower levels of them in their bodies. “It’s as if they’re using up their skin’s stockpile of antioxidants to fight off the inflammation from acne,” Dr. Bowe says. Meaning that if you’re experiencing breakouts, your shield against other skin damage is down.

While topical serums should remain a step in your skin care, building more resilient skin and aging better depends on eating more of the good stuff: Preliminary findings suggest that ingesting antioxidants can replenish skin’s natural reserves and increase resistance to breakouts. Further, studies show that a diet of

antioxidant-rich produce, anti-inflammatory fish, and healthy fats can help protect skin against wrinkle- and cancer-causing UV damage. **Start by eating vitamin C-rich foods daily, suggests Lisa Drayer, R.D.N., the author of *The Beauty Diet*: “A healthy intake of this antioxidant is linked to fewer lines and wrinkles.” Citrus fruits are packed with it, as are peppers, strawberries, kiwis, and broccoli. Other rock star antioxidants proven to boost UV protection are lycopene (found in tomatoes), beta-carotene (in sweet potatoes), cocoa flavanols (in dark chocolate), and coffee.**

“A just-published study proved that four or more cups of caffeinated coffee a day could reduce your risk of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, by 20 percent,” notes Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a dermatologist in New York City.

Protein builds a clearer, smoother complexion

The science here has always been unequivocal: “Amino acids from proteins serve as the building blocks for structures within the skin, including collagen, so protein is essential for keeping skin healthy,” Dr. Bowe says. No need to go paleo or adopt a protein diet; all it takes for an active person is 0.5 grams of protein daily for each pound of body weight.

Experts say most of us are hitting our daily dose—one serving of a lean option like chicken contains 26 grams of protein—but that there are added skin perks if you pick fish as a regular source. A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* showed that people who ate fish had less acne. Dermatologists suspect that the real hero is fish’s

Eat the alphabet: Foods with vitamins A, C, and E can help skin fend off free radical damage and even wrinkles.



omega-3 fatty acid content. “Omega-3 fatty acids have an anti-inflammatory effect on the body and skin, and acne is an inflammatory condition,” Dr. Zeichner says. Not a fish lover? Get your omega-3 fix from protein sources such as walnuts.

So, which diet to follow?

Simply put, to nourish your skin from the inside out, you need to eat a balanced diet that’s full of fish, produce, whole grains, and healthy fats and short on refined carbs. That last point is nonnegotiable if you don’t want to undermine your clear-skin regimen. Beyond the assault that high blood sugar makes on your collagen, researchers believe that a poor diet full of low-fiber comfort foods can slow digestion and promote unhealthy bacteria, which then leads to a leaky gut lining. This causes inflammation in the body, which worsens inflammatory skin conditions like acne, rosacea, and eczema.

Stick to fish- and veggie-laden Mediterranean and Asian diets, for example, and you’ll check off all the right boxes for a great complexion. An Asian diet can also net you a few bonus nutrients, such as soy (“It contains the antioxidant genistein, which may reverse existing sun damage,” Dr. Zeichner says) and fermented foods like miso and kombucha, which are rich in probiotics. A clinical review in the journal *Gut Pathogens* shows that probiotics—good bacteria—can help heal the gut and calm skin.

And the final must for healthy skin: Don’t forgo your H₂O. “Water is crucial for proper skin cell functioning,” Dr. Zeichner says. “If those cells are dehydrated, your skin can’t do its job of turning over new cells, creating collagen, and repairing damage.” Bottoms up! ★

