

The Best —and Worst— Foods for Beautiful Skin

That \$150 serum can't do as much for your skin as skipping the sugar and getting your greens.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT, AND FOR BETTER OR WORSE, THE FORENSIC EVIDENCE SHOWS UP RIGHT ON YOUR FACE. Not surprisingly, the same foods that help you control your weight and give you a steady stream of energy are also good for your skin. (Conversely, the fried foods, soda and sugary treats that are bad for your waistline aren't complexion-friendly, either).

"Our skin is the largest organ in the body, and just as nutrition plays a role in the function of our heart and lungs, it also plays a role in the maintenance of the skin," explains Caroline Passerello, MS, RDN, LDN, a dietitian and a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (and a Pilates devotee). When her clients start eating more healthfully, "many comment on the improved appearance of their skin," she adds. "They are typically eating more fruits and vegetables than before and have switched from refined to whole grains, in addition to exercising more, staying hydrated and focusing on their self-care."

Whatever your particular skin issues, adjusting your diet can result in a more beautiful, glowing you.

RX FOR DRY AND AGING SKIN

Want to minimize the signs of aging—wrinkles, fine lines, dryness, dullness and a loss of elasticity? Here's what you should (and shouldn't) be eating.

PASS (UP) THE SUGAR.

Cookies, cakes and ice cream don't do your complexion any favors (though it's not all bad news—chocolate may benefit skin; keep reading). Dr. Diane Madfes, a dermatologist and assistant clinical professor at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City, points to people with diabetes as an example of what happens to the skin as a result of blood sugar spikes. "We know that the skin of people who have diabetes ages faster, and part of that is the sugar. It's a result of glycation, which is when sugar attaches to the collagen in the skin. This causes a decrease in collagen production and slows down elastin production. That's when you see sagging skin and poor wound healing, plus bumps and bruises take longer to heal. We know that the skin of people who

have diabetes—or who are overweight or have insulin resistance—doesn't heal as quickly, sags more and has a sallow look to it."

Even if you don't have diabetes, sugar can be a factor in older-looking skin, including sagging, wrinkles, fine lines and a less-than-glowing complexion. Research backs this up: A 2016 study published in the *British Journal of Dermatology* confirmed that glycation plays a role in skin aging, including decreased collagen and elastin production, dryness and redness.

Madfes advocates moderation versus an all-out sugar ban, and Passerello agrees. If you eat a healthy, balanced diet that includes moderate amounts of sugar, it will not likely have a negative effect on the skin, she says. But stick to just a bite or two.

SAY SI TO C.

You knew we were going to mention fruits and vegetables before long, didn't you? It's true, they're vital to beautiful, youthful looking skin. "If you find that your skin is becoming wrinkled and aged, you may need to include more vitamin C-rich foods in your diet," says Lisa Drayer, MA, RD, a dietitian and the author of *The Beauty Diet: Looking Great Has Never Been So Delicious*

THREE REASONS YOU MAY HAVE DARK CIRCLES

Granted, most causes of dark circles under your eyes are not diet related (hint: blame your DNA, or that late-night Netflix binge). So while even the healthiest diet can't deliver the same effect as a good concealer, making these few tweaks can help.

YOU'RE NOT DRINKING ENOUGH WATER.

"When we are dehydrated, our available water shifts to essential functions, leaving less for the skin, which can contribute to dark circles and wrinkling," says Caroline Passerello. Dr. Diane Madfes recommends drinking eight glasses of fluid a day.

YOU'RE EATING TOO MUCH SALT.

"Limit foods high in sodium, such as salty snacks, as well as processed, canned and frozen foods, and condiments like soy sauce," advises Lisa Drayer. "These foods can cause water retention throughout your body, and can contribute to puffiness under your eyes."

YOU FORGOT TO HAVE SOME DARK CHOCOLATE.

The dark stuff is loaded with flavonols, which can help improve blood flow to the skin and diminish the look of circles, she adds.



(McGraw Hill, 2008). "Vitamin C stimulates collagen synthesis and protects against aging skin. In one study, published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, researchers examined the effect of diet, not supplements, on the skin of women. It found that a diet high in vitamin C-rich foods was associated with less noticeable wrinkles.

"Some top sources include kiwi, oranges, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and red peppers," she says.

THE ANTI-ACNE DIET

ACNE'S NOT JUST A TEEN THING. In a 2007 survey published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, 51 percent of women and 43 percent of men over the age of 20 reported having acne.

While there is no definitive proof that any one food causes breakouts in everyone, what you eat can aggravate it: A 2013 review of previous studies published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* found a link between acne and high-glycemic diets (high-glycemic foods like cookies, white bread and doughnuts raise blood sugar levels more quickly than those low on the glycemic index). "The consumption of high-glycemic-index foods appears to trigger a cascade of responses, which can lead to acne through effects on growth hormones and sex hormones," says Dr. Whitney P. Bowe, a dermatologist in New York and the lead author of the study. "These studies show that low-glycemic-index diets may improve acne."

Sugary treats and "white carbs" like white bread, flour tortillas and rice exacerbate acne in two ways, according to Dr. Diane Madfes. "They increase sebum [oil] production, which clogs pores and leads to breakouts, and they increase your androgen levels, which are hormones that contribute to acne."

While not guaranteed to ban blemishes, "I recommend steering clear of sugary foods, like candy, cookies, cake and sugar-sweetened beverages, which may contribute to acne," says Lisa Drayer, who

has more diet-related beauty tips on her website, www.lisadrayer.com. "Limit your intake of these added sugars to no more than 10 percent of your total calories (that's 150 calories on a 1,500 calorie diet)."

Upping your intake of omega-3 fatty acids may also help. "Acne may be caused by taking in too few omega-3 fats (found in fatty fish such as salmon, sardines, herring and trout) in relation to your intake of omega-6 fats (found in corn, soybean, canola and sunflower oils and foods processed with them)," says Drayer. "Such an imbalance can cause inflammation, leading to blocked pores that cause an overproduction of oil." Bonus: Omega-3s also deliver anti-aging benefits.

A small number of people may find that giving up gluten or dairy may improve their skin, says Drayer. "There may be a link with gluten sensitivity and inflammation in some individuals—and this could, perhaps, trigger the activation of inflammatory skin conditions like acne." For these few people, eliminating gluten may help. To see if you're one of them, try going gluten-free for two weeks and see if your skin clears up.

Since acne has many causes, "I encourage clients to think about the whole picture when they blame breakouts on dietary choices," says Caroline Passerello. "If they notice a correlation between specific foods and a skin condition, think about what else takes place when those foods are consumed: Are they also working out less, more stressed, more hormonal, etc.?"

"Foods that may help to reduce free radicals caused by UV exposure are those high in the antioxidants A, C and E," says Passerello.



CAN YOUR DIET HELP PSORIASIS?

"PSORIASIS IS AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE, WHICH IS INFLAMMATORY," says Dr. Diane Madfes. "Going on a gluten-free diet *can* decrease inflammation in some people, so they may have fewer flares. I'll have patients go on very strict gluten-free diet for two weeks to see if it makes a difference in their skin. You have to give it a full two weeks, and you cannot cheat, even a little bit, or you have to start over. If you're not seeing much of an improvement, you're not one of those people who would benefit from that type of diet." For a few people, however, going gluten-free can improve their psoriasis.

Losing weight may also help patients with psoriasis, according to a 2014 study in the *British Journal of Dermatology*. "There was a clear correlation between the amount of weight loss and the improvement of psoriasis," says Dr. Luigi Naldi, a dermatologist in Bergamo, Italy, and the lead author of the study. "Patients who lost more weight experienced a larger improvement in psoriasis," he adds, though even losing just a few pounds had an effect on the severity of the disease.

Omega-3 fish-oil supplements can also help. With psoriasis, "there are changes in patients' skin-metabolism pathways," says Madfes. "We can help them by making sure there is enough cholesterol and fatty acids in their skin, so I'll have people take fish-oil supplements."

"Omega-3 fatty acids [found in fish like salmon and sardines] also help lubricate skin and prevent moisture loss from cells," says Drayer.



SAY CHEERS...IN MODERATION.

Alcohol is another skin saboteur. "Alcohol has a diuretic effect, so in excess, it can dehydrate your skin," says Drayer. It also causes inflammation, which manifests as puffiness, redness and that weathered look. So drink in moderation, which means one drink a day for women and two for men. (And compensate by sipping even more H₂O).

GET SWEET ON CHOCOLATE.

"Chocolate contains high levels of cocoa flavanols, plant compounds with antioxidant properties," says Drayer, who has been a Pilates fan for almost 10 years. "They have been associated with softer, more hydrated skin, according to recent research."

GO FOR THE EASY A.

"Sweet potatoes, carrots and spinach are rich in beta-carotene, a pigment that gets converted to vitamin A in the body," Drayer explains. "It keeps skin soft and smooth; meanwhile, a deficiency of vitamin A can result in bumpy, rough skin."

MAKE OMEGAS ALPHA.

Besides helping to lower your risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and arthritis, "omega-3 fatty acids [found in fish like salmon and sardines] also help lubricate skin and prevent moisture loss from cells," says Drayer. "They also protect against inflammation that can lead to dry, scaly skin and redness."

They may also help protect against sun damage and skin cancer, according to a 2013 study by the University

of Manchester in England. Researchers found that taking a regular dose boosted skin immunity to sunlight.

"Fatty fish, like salmon, herring, sardines and trout are excellent sources of omega-3s," says Drayer.

Madfes recommends sprinkling omega-3-rich ground flaxseeds on salads or chicken cutlets. "They're so easy!"

HIT THE H₂O.

"Staying adequately hydrated with water and other non-caffeinated unsweetened beverages is absolutely essential," says Passerello. When you don't drink enough fluids, your skin can become dry, tight, flaky and more prone to wrinkling. So sip at least eight glasses of water a day for a radiant, more youthful looking complexion.

PHOTOS BY BIGSTOCK

GO GREEN.

"I recommend green tea as a beauty beverage," says Drayer. "It is the only tea that contains a significant amount of the antioxidant epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG). EGCG rids the body of cell-damaging free radicals. Research has also suggested that green tea may help protect against UVB light-induced skin disorders, including photoaging, melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancers."

To get the most benefits from your green tea, Passerello says to make sure the water is hot, but not boiling, when you steep it.

FIGHT FREE RADICALS.

"Free radicals [which are a result of sun exposure and pollution] cause skin damage, which causes a breakdown in collagen so you

get more wrinkling and fine lines," explains Madfes. While this doesn't mean you can skip the sunscreen, certain foods can make skin less sensitive to sun damage. "Foods that may help to reduce free radicals caused by UV exposure are those high in the antioxidants A, C and E," says Passerello. "Examples include red peppers, citrus fruit and dark-green leafy vegetables."

BEAT FINE LINES AND WRINKLES TO THE PUNCH.

While it's never too late to change your eating habits, starting years before wrinkles appear will pay off in the long term. "Begin eating a balanced diet as early and often as possible to maintain collagen and elastin," says Passerello. **PS**