

Try these “super” foods and be comfortable in your own skin

By Erinn Hutkin, Special to U-T San Diego 6 A.M. NOV. 25, 2014

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The phrase “you are what you eat,” is likely one many people have heard or said in jest. But the term holds true when it comes to the health and appearance of the skin and whether it has a healthy glow or is wrinkled and dry.

The structure of the skin contains elements that have their precursors in the foods we eat. “Healthy skin contains essential proteins and fats that need to be replenished with

our diets,” said Dr. Salvatore J. Pacella, division head of plastic and reconstructive surgery for Scripps Clinic in San Diego.

And when one eats a healthy, balanced diet, it becomes very apparent in terms of appearance, said Manuel Villacorta, a registered dietitian with more than 16 years of experience as a nutritionist. He said healthy diets mean healthy cells, which means healthy skin.

For optimum health and great skin, doctors recommend consuming three servings of fruits and five servings of vegetables per day. An important component to remember when eating fruits and veggies is to vary the color of what’s being eaten. Villacorta said the colors of fruit and vegetable provide different health benefits based on the phytonutrient profile. Phytonutrients are the pigments that give fruits and veggies their defining color.

To keep skin looking healthy and at its best, Pacella recommends opting for “superfoods” such as blackberries, blueberries, grapes, nuts and green vegetables, which have the highest antioxidant concentrations. He said antioxidant phytochemicals — nutrients found in nature — are important for skin health because they protect cell membranes.

And when it comes to veggies, the greener the better, he noted. Foods such as kale, collard greens and spinach are loaded with skin-plumping vitamins A, E and C and are rich in antioxidant phytochemicals. He said phytochemicals can also protect against UV damage, which leads to premature aging of the skin, wrinkling or potential skin cancer.

Even though some foods, such as chocolate, have earned a

reputation for causing acne-prone skin, Pacella said that chocolate — specifically dark chocolate — can have beneficial effects. Chocolate is high in fatty acids and antioxidants that can help protect against sun damage.

The worst offenders, that can damage the skin, are alcohol and high-glycemic sugary foods such as cakes, pasta and white bread. Salt intake can also have a big effect on the skin, making it appear puffy and swollen, as can alcohol. High-glycemic foods can affect the skin's ability to fight infection and destabilize proteins, such as collagen and elastin, found in healthy skin. This leads to skin thinning, flaking and deformity.

Dr. Melanie Palm, director of the Art of Skin MD and an assistant volunteer clinical professor at the University of California, San Diego, suggests incorporating the following into diets for skin health:

- Polyphenols: These antioxidants are found in dark red fruits such as pomegranates, blackberries, blueberries, strawberries and plums.
- Vitamin E: Protects the integrity of healthy skin cells and is found in nuts such as almonds and in sunflower seeds.
- Vitamin C: This is found in sweet potatoes, citrus fruits, papaya, tomatoes, broccoli, red peppers and strawberries. It is a co-factor in collagen production and a potent antioxidant.
- Carotenoids: This group of antioxidants reduces free radical production in the skin. Lycopene, a type of carotenoid, is found in tomatoes and pink grapefruit and helps reduce free radical production in the skin. Other

sources of carotenoids include dark orange/red vegetables such as carrots.

- Flavanols: This is an antioxidant found in dark chocolate. It also contains caffeine, which may reduce skin puffiness if used topically.

- Vitamin A: This vitamin helps regulate skin turnover and is helpful against acne. There are many sources, such as orange vegetables and dark leafy greens (think carrots, sweet potatoes, squash and spinach) as well as low-fat dairy products such as Greek yogurt.

- Essential fatty acids: Omega 3 fatty acids decrease inflammation and irritation in the skin, improve hydration by attracting water to the skin and help with the integrity of the skin barrier. They can be found in flaxseed, salmon, mackerel, walnuts and canola oil.

- Selenium: This is found in tuna, whole wheat bread, turkey and Brazil nuts. It provides antioxidant production and aids in preserving the component that provides a bounce-back quality to youthful skin.

- Isoflavones: These may help preserve collagen function and its chemical behavior can mimic estrogen. It's found in soy sources such as tofu and edamame.

Pacella's best advice is eating and drinking in moderation.

"It makes no sense to eat a gallon of nuts or a pound of chocolate to help protect your skin at the expense of your waistline," he said. "Many of the super foods, particularly those high in fatty acids, are higher calories. They should be

taken as part of a healthy, balanced diet.”

In addition to the right foods to maintain healthy skin, fluids play a role too.

Pacella said studies show that one serving of alcohol per day — specifically red wine — has cardiovascular benefits. Good blood flow leads to healthy skin, particularly in the hands, feet and legs.

Katie Ferraro, a registered dietitian and assistant clinical professor of nutrition at the University of San Diego Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science, said animal studies suggest that green tea, which is rich in antioxidants, may help reduce damage from UV rays and premature aging of skin.

She said diets should also include plenty of water. Dehydration can make the skin appear more wrinkled and less healthy. However, drinking excess water won't improve overall skin condition.

A good way to tell if you are well-hydrated is by keeping an eye on the color of your urine. She said pale yellow or clear urine means you are well-hydrated, while dark yellow or pungent smelling urine means you need to drink more water.

Aside from water itself, she said, high-water-content foods such as fruits and vegetables provide water, as do other beverages. To prevent dehydrated-looking skin, Ferraro suggests limiting sugar-sweetened beverages, but keeping fluid intake up.

Palm said when it comes to water intake, people should

strive for at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water daily. She said a great rule of thumb is a gallon a day.

She said increased hydration allows body circulation to perform more efficiently, delivering needed nourishment to cells including skin cells. Significant hydration allows us to sweat more effectively, and food hydration levels lead to hydrated skin, which appears plumper and more vital.

In addition to a healthy, varied diet that's loaded with water, vegetables and fruit, great skin is also achieved with exercise.

Ferraro said while there's no particular diet or exercise pattern to adopt to maintain your skin, general recommendations for preventing wrinkles and blemishes do include engaging in regular activity.

"Your body's largest organ is your skin," she said. "Exercise improves circulation, which benefits your skin as it circulates more oxygen to the skin. Exercise may also help induce collagen production, which can prevent wrinkles."

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