Topical Treats

You may not think of food as part of your skin care regimen, but the vitamins and minerals in a well-balanced diet indeed provide nutrients that keep your body's largest organ healthy and gorgeous.

March 1, 2011 By Willette Francis

What part of the body do you first notice when you look at other people? Is it the face? What about the face's covering? That's the skin. It covers the entire body and protects what's inside.

In addition, the skin controls body temperature, keeps out infection, acts as a waterproof barrier, protects the tissues underneath and mends itself when damaged. To do all this, skin needs to be fed a nutritious diet so it can continue to protect your body and give you healthy, beautiful skin.

And although many people don't connect healthy, beautiful skin to what they put in their mouths, nutritionist Rovenia Brock, PhD, (a.k.a. Dr. Ro) stresses that the secret to great skin has nothing to do with the concoctions contained in pricey cosmetic creams in fancy jars and bottles. Healthy, beautiful skin starts with a balanced diet chock-full of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that promote healthy skin from the inside out.

But what are the best sources of these essential nutrients? According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) daily food guide—perhaps better known as the food pyramid (myfoodpyramid.gov)—you can get the skin of your dreams from a diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat milk and dairy products, lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs and nuts. It should also be low in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, salt and added sugar.

Want more specifics? Check out the foods listed below before you organize your shopping list. These good eats can do wonders to ensure you'll have a glowing, healthy complexion:

Orange veggies and leafy greens.
Nature loaded carrots, sweet potatoes, butternut squash and acorn squash with beta-carotene—a natural pigment also found in green-colored veggies, such as collards, broccoli, spinach and kale. The body converts beta-carotene into vitamin A, which helps maintain and repair skin tissue. Without the right levels of this vitamin, skin becomes dry and flaky. This is why cosmetic

companies may include chemically synthesized vitamin A in their products. The food nutrient is known to reduce lines and wrinkles, control acne and provide relief for certain skin conditions. But the potency of any vitamins found in manufactured creams (called cosmeceuticals) is questionable—unless it is prescription-strength vitamin A, a.k.a. Retin-A or tretinoin. (Dermatologists prescribe it to fight acne and erase wrinkles.) Besides this prescription med, the best source of vitamin A—and other nutrients—is food. Why slather on expensive creams for iffy skin benefits when you can eat delicious fruits and vegetables and feed your body with the nutrient in a form it can readily absorb?

Low-fat yogurt.
Not only is this dairy product one of the best food sources of good-for-your-skin vitamin A, but it also contains "live" bacteria (lactobacillus acidophilus) that's good for digestive health. Two for one? Not bad, right? In addition, this bacteria found in yogurt is touted as an acne remedy. (But Medline Plus, the National Institutes of Health website, says there's insufficient evidence to substantiate this claim.)

Citrus fruits, tomatoes, berries, papaya, melon and bell peppers.
These rich varieties of colorful produce share a common trait: They're rich in vitamin C. Foods with vitamin C contain flavanoids, organic compounds in plants that aid collagen production. Collagen is a natural protein that makes skin smooth and supple. Plus, vitamin C also counteracts the effects of sun exposure.

Wheat germ, canola, safflower and sunflower oils, hazelnuts and almonds.
These oils and nuts contain vitamin E, which is also an antioxidant. Antioxidants reduce skin damage caused by the free radicals, which are damaging by-products of sunlight, smoke and pollution. (Free radicals break down collagen and elastin, another skin protein, and cause the skin to wrinkle and age.) Vitamins E and C team up to protect skin against damage from sun exposure and free radicals.

Whole grains, mushrooms and tuna.
Scientists believe the selenium contained in whole grains, mushrooms and tuna helps prevent skin cancer. It does so by protecting skin against sun damage and reducing the chances of sunburn. In addition, studies also show that patients who took daily selenium supplements experienced fewer skin cancer malignancies. What's more, these patients were less likely to die of cancer.

Oysters, lean meat and poultry.
Have acne-prone skin? The zinc found in this shellfish and these meats can work like edible Clearasil. How? By taming the skin's oil production, the zinc helps control acne breakouts and generally help clear skin sooner.

Cold-water salmon, sardines and mackerel.
These tasty fish contain essential fatty acids (EFAs), such as omega-3 and omega-6. Without EFAs, skin becomes more prone to dryness, inflammation and the appearance of white- and blackheads. Of these two EFAs, many people experience an omega-3 deficiency. This causes the skin to

produce a more irritating form of oil.

Can't seem to cram all these nutrients into your diet? Take this advice from Dr. Ro: "Include fruit and veggies in all meals by adding berries to whole grain cereals and salads; add omega-3-rich flaxseeds to salads and cereals; grab a hand of almonds as a snack; eat at least three to four different-colored fruits and veggies daily; drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water daily; add veggies to soup stews and whole-grain pizza; and cook more meals from scratch."

And for those who regularly munch on less-than-healthy snacks or meals, don't fret. "Start by gradually eliminating those foods that are the most damaging––sugar and junk food," Dr. Ro says. "That means inflammation-causing sweet foods, such as cookies, candies, cakes, pies and other empty-calorie foods. They cause puffy-looking skin that's lacking in moisture."

As for sodium-saturated foods (salty snacks, processed meats, cheeses and others of this kind), they can cause puffiness too, explains Dr. Ro, and this results in skin losing its youthful, dewy look.

What's more, a diet low in good fats (monounsaturated and the EFAs previously mentioned) and colorful fruits and vegetables may cause dry skin, inflammation, wrinkles, discoloration and blotchiness and contribute to aging, sagging skin overall.

But what about people who have skin conditions such as acne, eczema, rosacea or psoriasis? How does this diet affect their skin issues?

Consider this. A recent study showed that acne patients who ate fewer carbohydrates saw a reduction in acne flare-ups. As a result, researchers suggested a link between a low-sugar diet and acne improvement. And although this one finding isn't enough for docs to definitively confirm that certain diets can improve acne problems, it does arm researchers with some advice: If you notice an acne flare from eating certain foods, then you should avoid those foods.

And ditto for many rosacea patients. These are folks who, after eating spicy foods or drinking alcoholic beverages, experience the facial redness and swelling characterized by the condition. Other foods that cause rosacea flare-ups are liver, vinegar, soy sauce, dairy products, certain fruits and veggies, hot chocolate, cider, tea and coffee.

In addition, docs warn those with eczema—a condition that causes dry, red and itchy patches on the skin—to avoid foods that worsen these symptoms, such as eggs, milk, peanuts, soy, wheat and fish. (Some patients even report that chocolate, coffee, alcohol, tomatoes and sugar trigger the condition.)

If this is the case with you, it's important to discuss your diet with your dermatologist. In addition, it's also helpful to keep a diary of what foods trigger your skin condition—and be sure to share the findings with your skin doctor.

But no discussion about skin nutrition is complete without mentioning the best drink for your skin.

“Hand’s down, it’s water of course. ‘Nature’s champagne’ works best for healthy, dewy skin,” Dr. Ro says. (See sidebar for more on this.)

And lastly, your skin may also benefit by applying some foods topically. For example, a warm-milk bath, aloe vera gel or honey can hydrate and moisturize the skin. Itching? Try an oatmeal bath. See, food can make a delicious difference in your skin’s health and appearance.

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