

Putting Good Skin on the Menu

by Annet King

As skin therapists we are taught to examine, diagnose and treat skin from the outside in, dealing primarily with what's happening on the surface. We must always ask clients in-depth questions about their lifestyles, including their eating habits, as part of the pre-treatment analysis of the skin and face. But even when we ask, there is no consensus about what effects food, supplements and overall nutrition actually have on the skin. We all know we're supposed to drink plenty of water, but that's pretty much where the universal acceptance ends.

How Docs Handle It

The majority of mainstream dermatologists in the United States currently fall into the non-committal camp on the subject of nutrition. Few express the belief that there is a strong correlation between diet, digestion and the condition of the skin, preferring to focus upon topical treatment. Apart from environmental factors such as sun damage and other lifestyle choices such as smoking, the rest of the skin equation, according to most dermatologists, is determined by genetics. They will essentially say that if you were born with "good" skin, what you eat won't matter. Likewise, if you're experiencing a condition such as acne, they'll generally assure you that your parents and grandparents, more so than pizza, chocolate and sodas, are most likely to blame, acknowledging that stress and hormones also play a role.

The truth is that Western medicine in general has never placed tremendous stock in the importance of nutrition. The result today is our "fast food" nation, which is increasingly obese, alarmingly malnourished in spite of its bulk, more prone than ever before to diet-influenced disease such as heart disease and diabetes and generally misinformed about the relationship between food, overall good health and the health and appearance of the skin. And it's no small wonder that rosacea and adult acne are on the rise!

Much of the confusion comes from nutritional gurus themselves. A stroll down the aisles of any bookstore (or a surf around the internet) will leave the casual observer baffled from the contradictory messages. As a result, we are a nation of unsuccessful dieters. The Pritikin diet made major waves in the 1980s when it banished animal protein in the form of red meat and dairy foods from the American table. Simultaneously – and with a new surge of popularity in the past few years – the Atkins diet eliminated fruit, brown rice and whole grain carbohydrates, that Dr. Pritikin revered, telling us to stick with bacon, eggs and cheese steaks (minus the roll) to get lean and stay healthy.

In regard to these major two camps, prudence tells us that the wisest course is somewhere in the middle (the trouble is, from a bookseller's point of view, moderation is not as easily marketed as something more extreme!). In general, protein is a bit of a mixed blessing when it comes to its effects on the skin. While there is no arguing that animal proteins contain tyrosine, which boosts energy levels as it triggers neurotransmitters including adrenaline and dopamine, eating high on

the food chain also taxes the organs with waste elimination, especially the kidneys. One of the most visible warning signs: dark circles beneath the eyes, which signals that protein residue remains in the system. In a parallel sense, the animal protein residue – namely, animal fat – can accumulate in the arteries and threaten heart health, even though a meaty, low-carb diet may indeed strip away excess pounds and thus make a person appear and feel more fit.

To Carb or Not to Carb

The protein versus carbohydrate question continues to make nutrition headlines, but this is really only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to eating properly for good health and good skin. Although opinions about which foods are “good” and “bad” vary among nutritionists and other health practitioners, all agree that synthetic sweets, fast foods and pre-packaged, processed products, which abound in America, leave their mark in the form of metabolic waste.

According to Dr. Kenneth Yasny, a nutritionist, author and lecturer who has been in private practice for more than 20 years in Los Angeles, CA, these wastes divert the body’s energy, which may dramatically affect the skin. Accumulated waste slows down every process, from digestion and elimination to cell turnover in the epidermis. Skin becomes pasty and dull as a result. The dehydration that accompanies sluggish system function may also accentuate the formation of fine lines and loss of elasticity in the skin.

“These waste products cannot simply be flushed out with water, or even exercised out,” says Dr. Yasny. “To achieve what I call a ‘clean burn,’ you must choose foods that leave behind as little metabolic waste as possible. This means selecting foods that have been processed as little as possible, whenever possible.”

Dr. Yasny also explains that systemic inflammation, another response to metabolic waste, is perhaps the most far-reaching nutritional issue he encounters in today’s clients.

“Inflammation is by definition a series of irritations that produce internal swelling. This internal irritation interferes with the body’s optimal functioning in both subtle and overt ways,” he says.

Dr. Yasny cites two of the most common results as dehydration and malabsorption of food, both of which can leave the skin looking and feeling toxic and lifeless.

Because his practice is in the Hollywood Hills, Dr. Yasny’s clientele includes both working and aspiring entertainers, as well as the hard-driving personalities who are frequently on the management side of the business. He calls this sort of person “The L.A. paradox” – a stereotypical “rusher,” screaming into the cell phone, omnipresent water bottle gripped in a perfectly manicured hand, “...always in a state of mild hysteria, tearing across town to make a yoga class, in order to find inner peace.”

Drinking lots of water, according to Dr. Yasny, may be part of the problem rather than the universal cure, especially when dealing with a person in this stressed, anxious lifestyle. He

explains that “stress affects adrenal function, and we know that when we are forced to function at a high stress level over a prolonged period of time, the adrenals become exhausted.” Pointing out that the kidneys rest just below the adrenal glands, they are profoundly affected by diuretic and non-diuretic hormones and the excretory activity of the kidneys.

Believing that drinking water equals skin hydration, we’ve all bought into the “eight big glasses a day” credo, which Dr. Yasny feels may be brilliant marketing on the part of designer water companies, but not such a great idea for an individual experiencing adrenal exhaustion as the result of an extended period of stress.

“Constantly flooding and flushing the body with water can leach vital minerals out of the body. This includes disrupting that activity of the sodium/potassium pump in the stomach. Potassium loss can lead to heart arrhythmia, and, in the most extreme cases, even cardiac arrest, although of course this won’t happen merely as the result of drinking a lot of water and urinating frequently,” says Dr. Yasny.

Dr. Yasny stresses the need to maintain mineral balance as part of fluid intake and recommends that his clients add lemon juice, other fruit juices or “green” vegetable juices, all naturally high in potassium, to their “water habit” in order to prevent imbalances. He also recommends that his clients eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, as well as brown rice, because these are excellent sources of both minerals and hydration. Dr. Yasny also recommends that his clients take a trace multi-mineral supplement, which generally contains approximately 40 minerals.

Absorbing the Good

Another critical aspect of nutrition that impacts the skin is the need for full absorption of nutrients during digestion. Part of the American nutritional malaise, explains Dr. Yasny, is malabsorption, meaning that the foods we eat are not fully broken down into useable components before they are eliminated. So, while we may be eating a potentially nourishing diet, and, if we are like most Americans, are almost surely consuming a sufficient number of calories, we are not fully nourished from our meals.

“Stress in itself stops digestion and shuts down absorption,” he comments. Dr. Yasny says that another factor in malabsorption is the super-sized portions for which America is known.

“Restaurant portions are almost always about double what you really need at a single sitting,” he comments. “Remembering that the stomach is about the size of your fist, overburdening the digestive system will often result in back-up, or acid reflux.” This in part explains how Americans, who have access to the largest, most diverse and safest food supply in history, may ironically still suffer from poor nutrition. Dr. Yasny also recommends eating as early in the evening as possible, to allow for the fullest, deepest digestion before retiring for the night, as well as a post-meal walk to further support breakdown and integration of nutrients.

Also contributing to malabsorption is simple blockage. Certain foods may coat the lining of the

intestine, often through the formation of mucus. This glue-like coating or lining becomes an impermeable seal, impeding the chemical transfer of nutrients from the food being digested through the walls of the intestines. Dairy foods are often cited as mucus-forming, and therefore are potential barriers to effective absorption, although nutritionists differ on the severity of the syndrome.

“I would like to see everyone give up all junk food, coffee, sodas, dairy products and sugar,” says Dr. Yasny, “but I also am a realist. Digestion, elimination and the resilience of the skin are intertwined, and just cutting back on potentially troublesome dietary elements will help add a daily source of mineral-rich green vegetables and a good mineral supplement, and you are likely to see visible improvement.”