

Dealing With Your Aging Skin

Q: Are older people thin-skinned?

A: Yes, literally. As you get older, your skin changes too. It loses fat, and gets thinner. It doesn't look as smooth and plump as it did when you were a teenager. Scratches and cuts take longer to heal. If you spent a lot of time outdoors over the years, your skin may be more wrinkled and dry. Prolonged exposure to sunlight can cause age spots, and even cancer. But you can take steps to protect your skin.

Older people often have dry skin on their lower legs, elbows, and lower arms. Dry skin can be caused by something as simple as not drinking enough liquids, smoking, being in very dry air, feeling stressed, or losing sweat and oil glands. Diabetes or kidney disease also can cause dry skin. Using too much soap or antiperspirants, or perfume, taking hot baths—all can make dry skin worse.

Because older people have thinner skin, their skin will bleed more easily when scratched, and bleeding can lead to infection. Some medicines can cause skin to feel itchy. Dry skin happens more often in the winter, because cold air outside and heated air inside causes low humidity. Forced-air furnaces in your home make skin even drier. When your skin loses moisture, it will crack and peel, or become irritated and inflamed. Bathing too frequently, and using harsh soaps, may make dry skin worse. If your skin feels very dry and itchy, talk to your doctor about how to relieve these symptoms.

Some tips for dealing with dry skin at home: take fewer baths; use milder soap; warm water is less drying than hot water; don't add bath oil to your water--it can make your tub too slippery; use a humidifier to add moisture to a room; moisturizers and emollients should be applied to wet skin; after washing, pat your skin dry, then add moisturizers. Sweating can make dry skin worse, as will strong

soaps, detergents, chemicals and solvents. Sudden changes in body temperature or stress may cause you to sweat, make your dry skin condition worse.

Bruises are another skin condition that happen more easily with the elderly. It also takes longer for the bruises to heal. Some medicines or illnesses can cause bruising. If you see bruises and you don't know how you got them, especially on parts of your body usually covered by clothing, talk to your doctor.

Wrinkling is another condition of aging skin. Ultraviolet light from the sun will make your skin less elastic. Some things you can't escape---like gravity---which can cause your skin to sag and wrinkle. But there are also some habits you can alter---like smoking---which can wrinkle the skin. Some "cures" for wrinkles can be painful or even dangerous, and should be done by a doctor.

Age spots, once called "liver spots," are flat, brown spots often caused by years in the sun. They're bigger than freckles, and show up frequently on areas like the face, hands, arms, back, and feet. Age spots are harmless, but using sunscreen can prevent more sun damage.

Another common feature of aging skin, especially for women, are "skin tags," which are small, usually flesh-colored growths of skin that have a raised surface. They are most often found on the eyelids, neck, and body folds such as the arm pit, chest, and groin. Skin tags are harmless, but they can become irritated. A doctor can remove them if they bother you..

Shingles and pressure ulcers are two other conditions that will affect the skin. For more advice on how to deal with these two conditions, go to <http://www.healthinaging.org/resources/resource:eldercare-at-home-skin-problems/>