

[IMAGE]

Take Care of Your Skin Naturally

By Claudia Anrig, DC

Are you aware that the largest organ in the human body is actually the skin? Accounting for 16 percent of total body weight and covering up to 22 square feet of surface area, the skin is more than just a "covering," as originally thought.

A complex system made up of nerves, glands and cell layers, the skin plays an intricate role in overall health. In fact, the skin is so important that the abrasion experienced by the skin during its passage through the birth canal during a vaginal delivery is what stimulates the action of a newborn's breathing. Here are some tips on how you can take care of your skin naturally.

Skin Basics

Far beyond being the "bag" that holds the body together, skin is a protective barrier that serves as a buffer to guard against extreme temperatures, chemicals, bacteria and more. It also serves as a warning system, as it is comprised of sensitive nerves that send signals to the brain with messages from pleasure to pain.

It was once thought that the skin was completely inert and impermeable to chemicals; however, the truth is quite the opposite. The skin is incredibly absorbent and is not particular in regards to occupational, environmental or consumer chemicals. If it is slathered on the body, the skin will absorb it.

skin protection - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Skin Absorption 101**

The human skin will intentionally and unintentionally come in contact with chemicals on a constant basis. To be absorbed, a chemical will pass through the epidermis, glands or hair follicles in the skin. Sweat glands and hair follicles make up, at most, just 1 percent of the total skin surface. So, while some chemicals may be absorbed in this way, the majority will be absorbed through the epidermis.

Once passing quickly through the seven layers of the epidermis, toxins then enter the dermis, where they can enter the bloodstream or lymph and circulate to other areas of the body.

Products to Reconsider

It may be a little overwhelming, but it's important to consider how the human skin is "unintentionally" coming in contact with chemicals. The following are "personal care" products that may contain toxic chemicals:

- Bar soap and body wash
- Baby wipes and lotions
- Facial cleanser
- Hand sanitizer
- Makeup remover or face masks
- Acne treatments
- Anti-fungal or anti-itch creams
- Foot odor controllers
- Skin treatments for eczema, psoriasis, skin fading, scars, varicose veins, wounds and sunburns
- Anti-aging creams
- Body firming lotions
- Hand creams
- Moisturizers
- Antiperspirants and deodorants

Sadly, the majority of these products can be purchased in the average shopping center and contain at least one toxic chemical – and in some cases, as many as a dozen or more.

Take the time to recognize and avoid chemical ingredients when shopping. Chemicals such as oxybenzone (benzophenone-3), benzoyl peroxide, DEA (diethanolamine), MEA (monoethanolamine) and TEA (triethanolamine), dioxins (*used often to bleach disposable diapers*), parabens (methyl, butyl, ethyl, propyl), PEG (polyethylene glycol), butylene glycol, sodium lauryl sulfate, sodium laureth sulfate, triclosan, 4-methylbenzylidene camphor, Tinosorb M and S, Uvasorb HEB and isopentenyl-4-methoxycinnamate, just to name a few, are prevalent in cosmetics and other skin- and hair-care products.

Natural Skin Repair

Any damage to the skin should be carefully treated to avoid infection and the possibility that other bacteria or damaging chemicals can quickly get past nature's barrier. However, it's important not to automatically reach for a tube of antibiotic ointment or other skin treatment. Consider natural, organic options instead.

Aloe vera is hands-down the first defense when treating skin abrasions, burns or other skin damage. It will naturally moisturize and help the skin repair itself.

Apple cider vinegar is another excellent natural treatment remedy for certain skin conditions. Applying a compress can help reduce swelling in the face, hands and feet; soaking the feet in 1 cup of apple cider vinegar and water; or applying the apple cider vinegar directly to the affected area can treat skin fungus or yeast (including athlete's foot). You can also mix equal parts of apple cider vinegar and bentonite clay with 1 tablespoon raw honey and apply to the skin for 10-15 minutes before rinsing off with warm water for a natural, healthy facial mask.

Finally, for a natural moisturizer, *coconut oil* can be applied directly to the skin to help relieve dry patches or itchy skin (known as winter itch) during the winter months.

Going Organic

If you must purchase a skin care product, then be sure to look for the following labeling. These are just a few examples of seals that can be found on products to prove they are toxin-free:

- The *NPA seal* is from the Natural Products Association means 95 percent of the product is natural, excluding water, and the remaining 5 percent of ingredients cannot be suspected of any health risk as verified by peer-reviewed third-party scientific papers.
- *USDA Organic* designates that 95 percent of the ingredients are organic (meaning grown without pesticides) and the remaining 5 percent are non-organic ingredients on a list of approved substances sanctioned by the National Organic Program enforced by the USDA.
- *ECOCERT* is a similar certification devised by an independent European-based group requiring a minimum of 95 percent of ingredients come from natural origins.

Especially for Babies

Considering the sensitivity of a newborn's skin and its impact on their immune system, WebMD strongly encourages avoiding the following to decrease the risk of developing skin irritation, dryness, chafing and rashes: chemicals, fragrances and dyes in clothing, as well as detergents and baby products.

Further, to prevent allergies and rashes, don't overbathe babies. It is suggested that in their first month, newborns should only receive a sponge bath; during the first year of life, limit an infant's bathing to no more than three times a week to avoid removing the natural oils in their skin.

To prevent diaper rashes, consider the following recommendations from WebMD:

- Check diapers frequently and change them immediately when wet or soiled.
- Wash the diaper area with plain water and use a soft, clean cloth, not baby wipes.
- Pat the baby dry and avoid rubbing, or let the baby's bottom air-dry.

Home Remedies for Infants

Many common discomforts newborns and infants experience can be treated with household items or a change in diet. For instance, common with many newborns is cradle cap, which can be naturally treated by rubbing olive or coconut oil on the scalp.

Diaper rashes may be triggered by high-acid foods like strawberries, citrus and tomatoes. While not typical of an infant's diet, they may be consumed by the breast-feeding mother.

Disposable diapers, strong soaps or wipes may also be another source of irritation. Switch to cloth diapers and use a vinegar and water mix to wash the infant's bottom. Also consider infant-formulated probiotics, taken orally, to treat a stubborn diaper rash, as it may have been triggered by the use of antibiotics.

Eating to Protect the Skin Naturally

For a proactive approach to skin health, stay the course with a healthy diet. Dry skin can sometimes be a sign of an omega-3 deficiency, so recommend adequate intake of walnuts, salmon, shrimp and Brussels sprouts. Fresh vegetables, especially leafy green, organic and locally grown, can improve the skin by providing it with important vitamins and minerals from the inside. Fermented vegetables, such as sauerkraut, pickles, tempeh and kimchi, can actually help regulate gut microflora, which has been shown to help prevent skin irritations.

As for what not to eat, it's important to avoid sugars, fructose, grains and processed foods. Eliminating these items can cause a rapid improvement in the complexion because these foods have been shown to have a detrimental impact on the skin.

The Power of Human Touch

By the way, skin-to-skin contact between a mother and infant has been confirmed to maximize healthy childhood development. A recent study by the UMEA University in Sweden suggests simply touching the skin of an adult can have a positive effect. Results showed that touch massage reduced the stress response, as indicated by decreased heart rate and decreased activity in the sympathetic nervous system, and a significant decrease in cortisol and insulin levels. Anxiety levels significantly decreased in the patient group that received touch massage as compared to the control group. The study concluded that massaging the skin activates a brain area involved in sending rewarding, pleasant stimulations, which decreases anxiety and dampens the stress response.

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