

HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter
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Healthy Skin Awareness

The skin is the largest organ of the human body, whose main job is protection. This is why keeping the skin healthy is a huge component of overall health. The skin can also be a strong indicator for serious health issues plaguing other organ systems inside the body. November is National Healthy Skin Month. This month's newsletter will focus on common skin conditions and give tips on achieving and maintaining healthy skin.

Common Skin Conditions

There are a number of different skin conditions that plague us throughout our lives. The five most common skin conditions are acne, eczema, seborrheic dermatitis, skin cancer and psoriasis.

Acne is a skin disorder that causes pimples when the passageway that connects the skin's pores to the oil glands becomes clogged. Acne most often appears on the face, neck, shoulders, chest and back. Acne can come in many forms, the most common forms being blackheads and whiteheads. Other forms of acne are nodular and cystic acne, which are more severe. Nodular and cystic acne form deep in the skin and can cause scars. Eighty percent of Americans will have acne at some point in their lives and sixty percent will

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continue to suffer it into adulthood. Factors associated with the development of acne are heredity and hormones. The release of hormones, particularly growth hormone during puberty, explains the prevalence of the development of acne in the teenage years for both males and females.

Eczema is a "grab-bag term" which comes from the Greek word for "boils over". There are three common forms of eczema: atopic dermatitis, allergic contact dermatitis, and nummular dermatitis. Atopic dermatitis is a long-term genetic disease most often seen in children. Atopic dermatitis is the most common form of eczema causing itchy rashes in the crook of the elbows and behind the knees. The cause of atopic dermatitis is unknown, but it may result from a combination of inherited tendencies for sensitive skin and malfunction in the body's immune system. Avoiding soaps and other irritants, as well as using ointments can help reduce outbreaks and relieve itching. Allergic contact dermatitis begins to show in adulthood and is caused by environmental factors such as cosmetic agents, fragrances and the metals in jewelry. Nummular dermatitis looks like red and flaky coin-shaped patches of skin and is due to dry skin. Nummular

dermatitis can be very itchy. In all cases of nummular dermatitis moisturizing the skin, building up the skin barrier and avoiding drying out the skin are steps that can be taken to reduce the symptoms associated with this condition. Corticosteroids may also be used to reduce symptoms.

Seborrheic dermatitis causes oily, waxy patches to develop on the scalp. Seborrheic dermatitis is distinct from other forms of dermatitis. Seborrheic dermatitis affects five percent of people in the U.S. Seborrheic dermatitis can affect babies, typically in the first six months of life in the form of "cradle cap", a flakey, dandruff-like condition on the scalp. After the symptoms clear up, it rarely appears again until puberty.

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the U.S. Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are the most common types of skin cancer, but seventy-five percent of skin cancer deaths are from melanoma, the third most common form. Sun damage is commonly associated with skin cancer because excessive ultraviolet light is a leading cause of skin cancer. Genetics play a larger role in basal cell and melanoma than in squamous cell, which is due to sun exposure. Following the ABCDs of skin cancer can help lead to early detection of dangerous lesions. The ABCDs are as follows:

Asymmetry: growths with irregular shapes.

Border: moles with irregular, notched or scalloped borders are cause for concern, as these are all characteristics of melanoma.

Color: look for growths that have many colors or an uneven distribution of color.

Diameter: diameters greater than five millimeters should be evaluated by a doctor.

Evolving: has the mole or skin lesion changed color, size or shape? Does it look different than the others?

Early detection is always a key in cancer survival. Please refer to the May 2005 newsletter for more information about skin cancer.

Psoriasis is a chronic and disfiguring genetic disease. Psoriasis is a buildup of excessive skin tissue that looks red and thick and is covered with silvery scales. It appears on the elbows and knees first and can spread to other parts of the limbs and the trunk. Certain forms may affect particular areas like the hands, scalp or joints.

Tips for Healthy Skin

The skin is a complex system and can be affected by multiple factors including diet, environmental pollution, genetics, and stress. While genetics is out of our hands, a number of steps can be taken to control other factors that affect the health of our skin.

The most important and most obvious tip for achieving and maintaining healthy skin is protecting your skin from the sun. A lifetime of sun exposure can cause wrinkles, freckles, age spots, and rough, dry skin, not to mention skin cancer. For the most complete sun protection the following steps should be followed:

1. Avoid the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. because this is when the sun's rays are the strongest.

2. Wear protective clothing.
3. Use sunscreen when you're in the sun. Apply generous amounts of broad-spectrum sunscreen 30 minutes before going outdoors and reapply every two hours, after heavy sweating or after being in water.

Another helpful tip is "Don't Smoke". Smoking makes your skin look older and contributes to wrinkles. Smoking narrows the tiny blood vessels in the outermost layer of skin, which decreases blood flow. This depletes the skin of oxygen and nutrients, such as vitamin A. Smoking also damages the collagen and elastin in the skin. Collagen and elastin are the fibers that help keep the skin firm and elastic. Destroying these fibers leads to the development of wrinkles.

The next tip for healthy skin is to treat your skin gently. Daily cleansing and shaving can take a toll on your skin. The following are appropriate ways to treat the skin:

1. Limit bath time: hot water and long showers remove oils from your skin. Limit your bath or shower time, and use warm, rather than hot, water.
2. Avoid strong soaps: strong soaps can strip oil from your skin. Choose mild cleansers.
3. Shave carefully: to protect and lubricate your skin, apply shaving cream, lotion or gel before shaving. Use a clean, sharp razor. Shave with the direction the hair grows, not against it.
4. Pat dry: after washing or bathing, gently pat or blot your skin dry with a towel so that some moisture remains on your skin.

5. Moisturize dry skin: find a moisturizer that fits your skin type and makes your skin look and feel soft.

Eating a healthy diet is another key factor in developing and maintaining healthy skin. Eating healthy not only makes your skin feel better but also makes you feel better. Eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins are keys to a healthy diet.

The final tip for achieving and maintaining healthy skin is properly managing stress. Stress is associated with fluctuation in hormone levels which is also associated with acne. Stress also affects your ability to get quality sleep. Not getting enough "good" sleep affects the entire body, including the skin.

If you are concerned about the condition of your skin, question a physician or dermatologist for help in finding the appropriate treatments for your skin condition.

References

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**If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

The Arkansas State University Employee Wellness Newsletter is published monthly during the academic year by the College of Nursing and Health Professions. Health questions can be addressed to Dean Susan Hanrahan, Ph.D., ext. 3112 or hanrahan@astate.edu. Produced by Helen Grimes, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, Physical Therapy Program.