



Be comfortable in your own skin: Women and the factors affecting maturing skin

By Dr. Laura Collie

The condition of your skin changes considerably with age. There are numerous factors that influence these changes, both external (e.g., lifestyle and damage from UV rays) and internal (the most important being our hormones).

Hormones are chemical messengers that carry out a vast range of functions within our body, but they can also affect the composition and characteristics of our skin. Our bodies make a balance of estrogens and androgens, including the male hormone testosterone, and it is the changing concentrations of these hormones over time that contribute to altering our appearance.

Declining estrogens

The hormone estrogen stimulates the formation of skin-smoothing collagen and increases the dermal blood supply. The surge of estrogen experienced during pregnancy increases collagen and blood supply; this is what gives women their 'pregnancy glow.'

Starting in our late 20s, our estrogen levels begin to decline. This decreases collagen production, causing skin to become dry and itchy. Skin becomes thinner and loses its elasticity, leading to wrinkle formation. In the years leading up to menopause, estrogen levels decline at a much faster rate

than our testosterone levels. During this time, we can see an increase in some more masculine traits, including facial hair, oilier skin (creating what is termed 'adult acne') and even female pattern hair loss.

Managing your skin at any age

Eventually, at around the time of menopause, the testosterone level in females finally drops off to about the same level as estrogens. Regardless of your age, here are seven tips that will give you healthier skin.

- 1. Focus on eating good fats.** The essential fat of omega-3 can be found in foods such as fish, walnuts and soy. These fats increase oil production in the skin and act as a barrier to the moisture loss that causes skin to become dry.
- 2. Wear sunscreen of SPF 30 or higher.** UV radiation dries skin out more, increases wrinkles and can also cause skin cancer formation. These harmful rays can penetrate cloud and fog, so be sure to wear sunscreen at all times when outside.
- 3. Avoid hot showers.** Excessively hot water is very harsh on the skin, drying it out and stripping it of natural oils. Take shorter showers and use warm water to protect your skin. Pat (don't rub) your skin

dry and then immediately apply a moisturizer. This acts as a barrier.

- 4. Moisturize regularly.** Exfoliate your skin prior to applying moisturizer, as this helps it to penetrate the skin better.
- 5. Drink plenty of water.**
- 6. Exercise regularly** to increase the flow of oxygen and nutrients to the skin to make it appear healthier.
- 7. Stop smoking and drinking alcohol** (or at least cut back). These substances cause premature aging of the skin.

When to seek help

If you have ongoing concerns regarding the condition of your skin, make an appointment to see your GP or dermatologist for advice.

If skin dryness remains a problem, you may need to have your thyroid level checked, as an imbalance in this hormone can cause skin problems. For masculine traits due to an abundance of testosterone, a prescription for the birth control pill or spironolactone (a diuretic with anti-androgenic properties) may help to balance the hormones. **CS**

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