



About Your Skin

Your Skin & Your Dermatologist

Do I really need to take care of my skin?

Absolutely! Did you know that your skin is an organ of your body? It is even the largest of the body's organs. Its main purpose is to act as a shield by protecting your insides from external stress. Your skin also plays an important part in your appearance. By taking care of your skin, you help it do its job and you look healthy, too.

What functions does the skin perform?

Protector - Your skin takes quite a beating! It comes into contact with harmful agents, such as bacteria, viruses, and chemicals, and it works to protect your body from their effects. It also helps regulate your body temperature. For instance, to cool down, your sweat glands go to work for you. The skin can do all this while withstanding everyday attacks from the environment: sun, wind, heat, dryness, cold weather, pollution, and cigarette smoke.

Window of Health -

Your skin also reflects your health. Your skin interacts with other organs. It can alert you to health problems that may be going on inside your body. Dermatologists are experts at pinpointing skin signs of systemic disease.

How can I take care of my skin?

Here are some simple steps most people can take to protect their skin:

Use gentle non-drying cleansers and apply moisturizers.

Dry skin develops invisible (and sometimes visible) cracks that allow harmful bacteria and other irritating substances in

Help prevent skin cancer, wrinkles, and splotching by using sunscreen (SPF 15 or higher) outside, wearing protective clothing outdoors, avoiding exposure to the sun, and artificial tanning.

Wear protective gloves when you wash dishes, work with harsh chemicals, garden, or do other activities that can be hard on your hands.

Check your own skin for changes in moles, for new lumps, or for discoloration.

Use a regimen of skin care prescribed by your dermatologist devised especially for your skin to retard the aging process due to the sun.

Proper care of the skin also should include the help of a dermatologist.

Dermatologists are physicians who specialize in medical, surgical, and cosmetic skin care. They receive extensive training to help keep skin healthy, and to treat skin problems.

What kind of training do dermatologists get?

After completing medical school and a year of hospital internship in general medicine, general surgery, or pediatrics, dermatologists have at least three more years of intensive medical and surgical residency training. Dermatology training focuses on the medical, surgical, and cosmetic care of the skin, hair, nails, and mucous membranes (the "wet skin" of the mouth and genital area). Board-certified dermatologists have completed this training and passed a comprehensive test given by the American Board of Dermatology. About 8,500 board-certified dermatologists practice in the United States.

What role can a dermatologist play in the care of my skin?

A dermatologist can help you care for your skin in important ways:

Diagnosis -

Dermatologists diagnose skin disease quickly and effectively by noting your symptoms and checking your entire skin. They then give you options for proven treatments. If you have any symptoms of skin disease, see a dermatologist as soon as possible.

Prevention -

Dermatologists can also help you prevent unnecessary damage to your skin from the sun or the elements of wind and temperature. They do this through education and by showing you how to examine your skin for signs of skin cancer or other skin problems.

Surgery -

Dermatologists are also skin surgeons. They often perform surgery on the skin to remove cancer and other growths. Skin biopsy (taking a small piece of skin) is done to help make a correct diagnosis.

Cosmetic Procedures -

Dermatologists can improve the appearance of skin damaged by aging, sunlight, or disease. This includes the removal of wrinkles, brown spots, and broken blood vessels. Some ways they do this include filler injections (such as with collagen or fat), chemical peels (a form of skin rejuvenation), liposuction (a type of fat removal), and laser treatments.

Is there a certain age when people should first see a dermatologist?

No. Dermatologists treat people of all ages. Skin problems can affect everyone from newborns to older adults. You or your family members should see a dermatologist whenever you have symptoms of skin trouble. Nearly everyone will have some kind of skin problem in his or her lifetime. The skin's protective barrier can break down due to age, disease, or other factors. Your dermatologist can help you watch for the long-term effects of aging and disease, and also help prevent skin problems.

When might I benefit from regular visits to a dermatologist?

Some adults regularly visit a dermatologist to help find conditions such as skin cancer early. Since skin cancer is the most common cancer, it is a good idea to regularly see a dermatologist for skin check-ups.

A visit when early signs of sun damage appear, such as wrinkles and brown spots, may be advantageous.

What most common problems do dermatologists treat today?

Dermatologists have many effective medical, surgical, and cosmetic treatments for problems of the skin, hair, and nails. Here are some common conditions they treat:

Acne and its Scarring -

Acne affects most teenagers, but adults can get acne too. One survey placed acne as the most often treated skin disorder. Early medical treatment can reduce scarring due to acne. Acne scarring can be treated with dermatologic surgery.

Aging Skin -

Spotting, wrinkles, facial or leg broken blood vessels, fat deposits, and unwanted hair can be treated with dermatologic surgery by your dermatologist.

Cold Sores -

The herpes simplex virus can cause blisters called cold sores. There are two types of the virus. Herpes can occur around the mouth, nose, buttocks, genitals, and sometimes elsewhere. Treatment can control outbreaks and possibly help prevent the spread of infection.

Hair Loss -

Hair loss can occur for many reasons, the most common of which is hereditary baldness. New medicines may help reduce baldness in some people. Another treatment option is a hair transplant, which involves moving small strips of hair follicles from the back and sides of your scalp to the balding areas.

Hives -

Other names for hives are "wheals" and "welts." These itchy swellings occur in groups on any part of the skin. Sometimes they sting or burn. Each wheal lasts a few hours before fading away, leaving no trace. Reactions to foods, drugs, and other allergies can cause hives.

Nail Problems -

Problems with your fingernails or toenails could be a sign of a health problem. See a dermatologist if your nails are thick, tough, painful, have scaling, white spots, red lines, or brown and/or black streaks on them.

Itching -

Can be due to many causes including skin conditions (such as dry skin or dermatitis), medicine, and internal problems. A dermatologist can usually identify the cause of the itching and start appropriate treatment.

Psoriasis or Rashes -

Psoriasis is a persistent skin disease. In psoriasis, the skin forms red, thick patches covered by silvery scales. Eczema can be itchy or painful and have many causes. Hand eczema may start with dryness or may be an allergy. Athlete's foot rash can be successfully treated.

Warts -

A virus causes warts. Warts usually are skin-colored and feel rough. Warts can grow anywhere on the skin, but most occur on the hands. Plantar (foot) and genital warts are also common.

Skin Cancer -

Dermatologists have special expertise in the diagnosis and treatment of basal cell and squamous cell cancers as well as melanoma. Early detection can mean a cure after excision using dermatologic surgery techniques.

What can I expect from my visit to a dermatologist?

There are more than 2000 different skin diseases. Only a dermatologist has the knowledge to recognize them and offer the best chance for management through medical, surgical, and cosmetic treatments. You can expect several things during your visit:

Interest in you, your skin problem, and your concerns.

Medical expertise, history, and a physical exam relevant to your skin problem.

Any needed testing, such as lab tests and skin biopsy.

An explanation of the condition, treatment options, and potential adverse reactions to medicine or surgery.

An estimated time and cost of the treatment you choose.

Information about needed return visits.

Will I need prescription drugs?

When appropriate, dermatologists prescribe medicines, such as creams or pills. They are trained to prescribe drugs that have the best chance of helping you.

What changes are taking place in the field of dermatology?

Advances in dermatologic surgery, dermatopharmacology, dermatopathology, pediatric dermatology, medical dermatology, and immunologic dermatology provide new avenues for healing skin problems faster and better.