

Put Your Skin and Hair on Pause

Start now to defend two of your best assets from the aging process

by Susan Spencer

That thick head of hair and smooth brown skin you love showing off won't always look like they do right now; aging takes its toll on all of us. But with so many lifestyle choices and treatment options available that reduce the signs of aging, you can start now to maintain a fresh face and healthy hair for years to come.

Skin ages in different ways, according to Dr. Valerie Callender, a dermatologic surgeon in Bowie, Maryland. Doctors describe the natural softening of tissue, loss of volume or plumpness and the gravity shift that results in droopy skin as "intrinsic aging." "Extrinsic aging"—excessive wrinkles, dark spots and leathery texture—results from chronic sun exposure and damage.

"Caucasians tend to show more changes of extrinsic aging," Dr. Callender said. "In contrast, darker-skinned individuals show more signs of *intrinsic* aging. Extrinsic aging is less evident (with darker skin) because of the protective effects of melanin."

Chances are, you don't want to show signs of either. Here's what you can do now to slow down tell-tale age signs, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

20s

Start practicing healthy habits now. Dr. Jeanine Downie, a dermatologist in Montclair, New Jersey, and author of *Beautiful Skin of Color*, said, "Wear sunblock and don't smoke. This helps prevent fine lines, wrinkles and patchy-pigmented skin."

"A lot of African-American women think they don't need to use sunblock, but sun can

age you," agreed Dr. Monique Abner, a plastic surgeon in Charlotte, North Carolina. She keeps sunblock in the glove compartment of her car and reapplies it often.

Hair also takes a beating as you age, so treat it gently. Dr. Ken Redcross, an internal medicine physician in Manhattan, said that tightly braiding or styling hair in cornrows can cause permanent hair loss. And straightening hair with a hot comb makes it dry and brittle. Use products that keep the hair shaft moisturized, he recommended.

30s

If you haven't already, add exercise to your routine. "It pumps up your circulation, tones you and gives you that glow factor," Dr. Downie said.

She suggests that 30-somethings go for an antioxidant to reduce damage caused by free radicals, which break down skin cells. Try eating antioxidant-rich foods like blueberries, taking a supplement of coenzyme Q-10 or vitamin E or applying a cream with antioxidants.

A healthy diet makes a difference, Dr. Abner said. If you're trying



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to lose weight, don't cut out protein because protein helps collagen, the building block of skin, stay strong.

Skin tone becomes an issue in the 30s. Exfoliating with a chemical peel, such as glycolic acid or salicylic acid, evens out your complexion, reduces fine lines and controls acne breakouts. "You're going to get rid of those dusty cells on the outside and your cells are going to turn over," Dr. Abner said. "It helps with the integrity and texture of the skin."

Chemical peels can burn, and follow-up care is important. But peels are a non-invasive and less-expensive option (see sidebar) than surgery, and they achieve natural-looking results.

Microdermabrasion—a treatment that "sandblasts" the top layer of skin cells—is another way to exfoliate. The doctors we spoke with, however, said that chemical peels are generally more effective.

Laser treatments to improve skin tone should be used with caution: many are not appropriate for skin of color so be sure to go for a consultation before scheduling an appointment.

Simple treatments help, too. Dr. Amy McMichael, a dermatologist at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, said, "Good skin care with a retinoid-containing (vitamin A) or alpha hydroxy acid-containing wash or serum daily, beginning in the 30s, can help to keep the skin looking youthful and healthy."

40s

Your 40s are the time for facial assessment. Your body slows down its production of collagen and elastin, proteins that keep your skin firm and springy. Wrinkles appear and skin sags.

Botulinum toxin, known as Botox, is approved by the Food and Drug Administration for reducing the vertical creases between the eyebrows that make you look cross or tired. Botox and a similar product called Dysport work by temporarily paralyzing the "frown" muscle. Applied strategically by a well-trained physician, Botox gives your face a refreshed look. If injected incorrectly, though, it can cause eyelids to droop.

Injecting fillers like Juvederm or Restylane, which contain hyaluronic acid, can smooth skin that has lost volume.

See your doctor before hair loss becomes severe, Dr. McMichael said. The earlier you start treatment with a minoxidil solution (Rogaine), the better your chance for regrowing hair from dormant follicles. Be patient: it can take nine months to notice improvement.

50s

As you reach your 50s, step up the good habits you've developed: exercise more, get enough sleep and eat a balanced diet.

Skin and hair become drier and thinner, so sleep with a humidifier on and apply moisturizer and penetrating hair conditioner. Use a prescription dandruff shampoo for itchy scalp.

Injecting volumizing fillers like Radiesse and Sculptra can plump up deep-set facial lines and stimulate the body's collagen production.

At any age, even minimally invasive treatments have some risk. The doctors we spoke with stressed the importance of checking out a provider's qualifications and familiarity with working with skin of color. "These are medical procedures," Dr. Downie emphasized. "It's not a pedicure." ❗

The Cost of Looking Younger*

Sunscreen \$5–\$50

Products with retinol (a form of vitamin A)
\$10–\$50

Chemical peels A series of 3–4 treatments, one performed every 4 weeks; \$75–\$500 per treatment

Microdermabrasion A series of 5 treatments, one performed every 2–4 weeks; \$75–\$300 per treatment

Botox or Dysport \$300–\$600 per treatment, once every 3–4 months

Injectible fillers \$500–\$2,000, depending on how they're used

Laser treatments \$200–\$3,000

Surgery (facelifts, etc.) \$2,000–\$20,000

*Prices vary by procedure, provider and region.