

Precautions help prevent damage to skin

Don't seek the sun

By Barbara Balfour

Dermatologists agree that before you start investing in cosmetic facial procedures, it's important to realize that it's a lifetime of sun exposure, not just aging, that has contributed to your skin problems.

"Most of what we call 'old' is in fact sun-damaged," says Dr. Derek Woolner, a Calgary dermatologist. "If you looked at the backside of an 80-year-old person, no matter how wrinkled they were on their face, the skin on their backside would be smooth, white and much less wrinkled simply because it has been shielded from the sun."

However, the message that skin care practitioners want to send out there is not that people should live like hermits and avoid the sun entirely, says Woolner.

"Just don't seek out the sun. We still want people to be active outdoors and do things like play golf and tennis — you're still more likely to die of a heart attack than you are from skin cancer.

"But wear a hat and protective clothing when you're outdoors. Don't strip down to your briefest bikini or your Speedos. And where practical, avoid mid-day sun — 90 per cent of harmful ultraviolet exposure occurs between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m."

Woolner recommends wearing a sunscreen of at least SPF 30 or higher.

"The bigger the number, the better," he says. "The theory is that if you apply a sunscreen on your body as thickly as it has been tested in the lab setting, there is no need to use anything higher."

But in practice, in order to fully cover an adult body with sunscreen, you would need to use an ounce. Most sunscreens are sold in four ounce bottles.

"So if you wanted sun protection that truly approximates what's on the label, you would need to use one quarter of that bottle every time," says Woolner.

Because this isn't usually done in practice, it is important to reapply sunscreen often.

Another vital element to keeping your skin in tip-top shape is following a healthy diet.

"Your diet plays a huge role in keeping up your skin," says Hannah Arcega, owner of Thermae Advanced Aesthetics and a registered nurse with extensive background in dermatology.

"Calcium intake is particularly important for women. You need 1,000 to 1,200 milligrams a day, and you can get that from consuming a lot of dark green vegetables like kale, spinach and broccoli.

"It's important to keep yourself well-hydrated too. For every 100 pounds of body weight, you should drink one litre of water a day."

When outdoors, Arcega recommends wearing a hat with a four-inch brim and clothing that is tightly weaved together so that it can provide adequate protection from the blaring sun.

Arcega prefers using sunscreens that are less likely to cause chemical reactions or clog the skin's pores.

"I really like the Dermalogica line," she says.

"It's non-comedogenic



File photo

While people shouldn't live like hermits and avoid the sun entirely, they should protect their skin from ultraviolet light — especially between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

(less likely to cause blackheads or whiteheads), won't clog your pores and has antioxidants in it that will help condition your skin. It's new to Calgary from L.A. and what I like about it is that it doesn't contain any alcohol, formaldehyde or mineral oils. It's a very clean line.

"For daily use, it's good to have an exfoliating cream like an alpha-hydroxy acid product that can remove dead cells from the outer layer of your skin."

If you have a family history of skin cancer, are light-skinned or have a lot of moles on your body, you are at greater risk of developing skin cancer.

When it comes to mole removal from the body, there are two main reasons, says Woolner. "One is for esthetic reasons and the other is because they're worried about it," he says.

"I cut off a mole today because I'm worried about the way it looks today. There is no evidence that cutting a mole out will prevent cancer in the future."

Healthy moles should be smaller than six millimeters — the size of an eraser on a pencil. They should be round or oval and all one colour, whether blue, black or brown.

"You don't normally see moles change —

they may change over the course of 10 years, but they shouldn't change noticeably in a short period of time," says Woolner.

"For some people who have a large number of moles on their body, it is not unreasonable for them to stand in front of the mirror and look them over about once a month."

For patients who already bear the markings of sun overexposure on their face in the form of sun or age spots, there are some effective treatments available for them.

Arcega's clinic offers a treatment called Intense Pulse Light, which breaks down the pigmentation caused by sun damage, which appears on the face as dark brown circles.

"Intense pulse light treatments provide a broad spectrum of light energy that can cover several target spots on the face and body at once," she explains.

"Intense pulse light is more multi-purpose than a laser which is only one monochromatic laser.

"It is also good for getting rid of spider veins — those superficial blue, red or purple blood vessels near the surface of the skin. You need multiple treatments for either purpose, but you definitely will see an improvement the first time."