

# FEED YOUR SKIN

Certain nutrients can work wonders for your complexion, warding off flare-ups, hydrating cells, and reversing sun damage.

BY JUNO DeMELO



You're well aware of the power of a good facial serum or cream. But when it comes to healthy, glowy skin, did you know that what you put in your body may be just as important as what you smooth on your face?

Your skin is a reflection of your overall well-being, explains Whitney Bowe, MD, an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City—and, of course, your diet is a major factor in your health. Eating a wide variety of whole, nourishing foods can plump, smooth, and possibly even clear up your complexion from the inside out. “Topical products are helpful, but they don't get to the root of skin issues,” says Dr. Bowe. To support your skin on a deeper level, experts recommend focusing on a few key nutrients.



## Antioxidants

Think of these molecules (which are plentiful in plant foods) as tiny superheroes, shielding your cells from danger. Your skin's No. 1 enemy? Yep, you guessed it: the sun. “UV rays trigger the production of free radicals, which damage the proteins, lipids, and DNA in our

skin cells,” says Rajani Katta, MD, a clinical professor of dermatology at McGovern Medical School in Houston. Free radicals are so destructive because they have an unpaired electron, which makes them highly reactive with other molecules. That's where antioxidants come to the rescue: They donate an electron to free radicals, thereby neutralizing them. “They squelch free radicals,” as Dr. Katta puts it, protecting your skin against wrinkles, sagging, and possibly cancer, too.

There are beauty supplements packed with antioxidants, but you don't want to go overboard, says Lisa Drayer, RD, author of *The Beauty Diet*. Research suggests that consuming excessive amounts may be risky. (Studies have linked high doses of vitamin E to an increased risk of stroke, for example.) To get just the amount of antioxidants you need, Drayer recommends produce at each meal: “Eat fruit at breakfast and for a snack, and fill half your plate with veggies at lunch and dinner.”

## EAT UP

Aside from produce, other rich sources of antioxidants include herbs, spices, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and pulses.

SALMON IS A SUPERFOOD FOR YOUR SKIN.



## Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Like antioxidants, essential fatty acids also fend off sun-induced aging—but rather than preventing cell damage, they repair damage that's already been done. And that's not all: These fatty acids have anti-inflammatory properties that can help stop the breakdown of collagen (the main building block in your skin tissue) that occurs when you're exposed to UV rays. They trap moisture, too, helping to keep your skin hydrated.

Chances are you're already consuming more than enough omega-6 fatty acids, which are found in vegetable oils, like soybean, sunflower, and corn oils. So focus on boosting your omega-3 intake, says Dr. Bowe, specifically the types eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). The best sources are fatty fish like salmon, albacore tuna, mackerel, and sardines. Aim for at least two servings a week, says *Health* contributing nutrition editor Cynthia Sass, MPH, RD. Or, if you don't eat fish, consider taking a supplement with 1,500 mg of combined EPA and DHA.

## Probiotics

The bacteria in probiotic-rich foods (like kombucha and kefir) replenish the friendly flora in your GI tract, which may actually benefit your skin, too. Some experts suspect that an imbalanced intestinal ecosystem—where harmful microbes outnumber the helpful types—may be linked to skin-condition flare-ups. “One of the functions of our gut microbiome is to keep toxins, partially digested food, and bad bacteria from leaking into our bloodstream,” explains *Health* contributing medical editor Roshini Rajapaksa (a.k.a. Dr. Raj), MD, who is a gastroenterologist and cofounder of TULA Skincare. “If that happens, it can trigger skin inflammation, which can lead to acne, rosacea, eczema, and even wrinkles.”

To cultivate a robust microbiome, seek out a variety of fermented foods that are made with live and active cultures—such as yogurt, kimchi, raw miso, sauerkraut, and brine pickles. “But if you're having a hard time fitting those foods into your diet, or you have a skin condition, it's certainly reasonable to take a supplement,” says Dr. Raj.



## FIBER MATTERS

Fruits and veggies contain prebiotics, a type of dietary fiber that fuels “good” gut bugs and helps the microbial community in your belly flourish.



## Collagen

This protein is like the scaffolding for your skin tissue, holding its structure in place. Our bodies naturally produce collagen, but as we get older, we break it down faster than we can replace it (which is one reason crow's feet and saggy skin develop with age). You can also consume the protein in bone broth and collagen-infused bars, gummies, and powders. The question is, Does that ready-made collagen (sourced from animals) have the same plumping benefits for your skin?

“The research is in its infancy, but it does look promising,” says Sass. A small 2014 study, for example, found that women between the ages of 35 and 55 who took a collagen hydrolysate supplement for eight weeks experienced greater improvements in skin elasticity, compared with study participants who took a placebo. More and bigger studies are needed. “But anecdotally, I've never had a client use collagen and not report a difference,” she adds.

## SKIN TRIGGERS

Some foods are well-known for causing epidermal issues. Here's why.

1

### SIMPLE CARBS

If you've ever given up sweets for a few weeks, you might have noticed your face looked a little, well, tighter. That's because simple carbs can trigger the formation of “sticky” compounds called advanced glycation end products (AGEs), says Rajani Katta, MD, author of *Glow*. Those AGEs glom on to the collagen fibers that support your skin, weakening the fibers and causing your skin to lose firmness.

2

### COW'S MILK

Research has linked milk to acne. Struggling with breakouts? Try switching to an alternative milk to see if that helps. Or drink whole milk instead of skim, suggests Whitney Bowe, MD, author of *Dirty Looks*. Skim may be particularly problematic because it's bulked up with milk proteins to create a richer mouth-feel. Cow's milk may also bring on eczema flare-ups in people who have an allergy to dairy.

3

### ALCOHOL

Over time, heavy drinking can actually break blood vessels in your skin, leaving a red, blotchy appearance. But even a few drinks can be tough on your skin because booze is so dehydrating. It can also deplete your body's store of vitamin A, a potent, skin-supporting antioxidant. If you do imbibe, Dr. Bowe suggests snacking on kale, grapefruit, or watermelon the next day to replenish your A levels.