

STEPS TO SUPERIOR SKIN HEALTH

It's known to many as the cornerstone or pinnacle of any beauty routine. Now that I'm in my early 30's, it certainly hasn't been lost on me over the last 5 years or so that it's changing. When I wake up and look in the bathroom mirror first thing each morning, I see it – the permanent changes, the new lines forming, and the older creases deepening, growing. It's my skin. A living, breathing organ creating subtle changes to my smile, my eyes, and my silhouette. Though part of this process comes with the privilege of getting older, some of these changes didn't necessarily have to happen so quickly. And while it's the largest organ we have, our skin is often overlooked, taking on years of neglect through unprotected sun exposure, dehydration, and smoking, to name a few. Below is my personal skin scare story, as well as some of the steps I'm taking to ensure my skin remains healthy for this decade as well as the ones to come.

Although an Exercise Physiologist by trade, I've become incredibly intrigued with the health of my skin. When I was home from college for Thanksgiving Break in 2013, I noticed the small freckle beside my belly button had seemed to change almost overnight. It had surfaced after a bad burn, and its typical flat appearance was now raised. At the time, I knew enough to understand that I needed to make an appointment and have it examined further. After being referred to a dermatologist by the student health center on campus, they sent off a sample of my changing freckle for precautionary sake. I still remember sitting in the passenger seat of my Mother's mini-van when I received a call back: "Hi, Margo. We've received your lab work, and they did find abnormal cells in the sample we sent. These cells can be a precursor to skin cancer. This means we need you to come back in, and we'll excise, or remove, the cells. Can we go ahead and schedule your appointment?"

While everything turned out fine – I had the surgery, they took another sample to make sure they got all of the abnormal cells (which later lab work revealed they did), and my yearly skin checks have all come back with a clean bill of health, this health scare still created a permanent behavior change to my lifestyle, similar to the couple-inches-long scar I now bear on my stomach. Though it could've been much worse, it could've too perhaps been prevented had I followed the steps below to avert it. If you're not already, consider following the guidance outlined below to improve the health of your skin and ultimately, reduce your potential risk of developing skin cancer.

One of the most important actions we can take is to protect our skin from the sun. A young, impressionable, fair-skinned Margo completely ignored this stair on the skin health staircase as a young adult, and quite frankly, has paid for it today. Years of extreme burns, (Anyone else had sun poisoning, here?) unprotected by any kind of sunscreen simply for the chance to get a tan and look like some of my friends, gave me an impermanent tan that quickly faded throughout the Midwest winter, and a lifetime scar on my stomach I still get asked about 7 years later, along with the faintest signs of premature aging on my face. Now, I wear a sunscreen built into my daily moisturizer even though I'm only driving 8 minutes to my office job, and somedays don't leave until it's dark outside. When I'm working in the yard or know I'll be spending any amount of time out in the sun, I put on my SPF 30 sunscreen anywhere skin is showing. This includes my feet and hands, my ears, the part in my scalp, and any other easily missed or forgotten places. According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), you should "use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15. Apply sunscreen generously, and reapply every two hours — or more often if you're swimming or perspiring." Simply put, you can't apply sunscreen at 8 a.m. and expect to be covered

(pardon the pun) until 8 p.m. that night. Be diligent about reapplying if you're bound for a day in the sun.

Paying attention to the hour of the day you're outside is important as well, as the [Skin Cancer Foundation](#) suggests avoiding the sun or finding shade between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest. When you're outside, cover your skin with tightly woven long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and wide-brimmed hats. To further protect yourself, consider clothing that contains a UPF, or ultraviolet protection factor, as well as sunglasses that block ultraviolet rays.

Another skin health tip – don't smoke. It's 2020, and we all know the dangers of smoking, both inside and out. Curious as to the effects smoking has on your skin? "Smoking narrows the tiny blood vessels in the outermost layers of skin, which decreases blood flow and makes skin paler. This also depletes the skin of oxygen and nutrients that are important to skin health. Smoking also damages collagen and elastin — the fibers that give your skin strength and elasticity. In addition, the repetitive facial expressions you make when smoking — such as pursing your lips when inhaling and squinting your eyes to keep out smoke — can contribute to wrinkles. In addition, smoking increases your risk of squamous cell skin cancer." ([Mayo Clinic](#). 2019)

While eating a healthy, well-balanced diet is good for your overall health and a possible reduced risk of several types of cancer, some [research](#) suggests that certain compounds may play a role in skin cancer prevention or risk reduction, such as Omega-3 fatty acids, lycopene, Vitamin D, and Vitamin E. Again, while more research needs to be done in regards to skin cancer risk and diet, choosing to eat a healthy diet is still a strong choice for improving your overall health. Consuming daily recommendations of fruits and vegetables, and taking in lean proteins and whole grains are a great place to start. If you're interested in changing your diet for the better, give the [Mediterranean Diet](#) or the [DASH Diet](#) a look, as these diets have practical, sustainable recommendations as well as a strong focus on fruits and vegetables containing some of the compounds listed above.

Additionally, [stress](#) is yet another major factor in skin health. As I've said already, it's 2020, a stress-inducing event in and of itself, but if we don't take the proper steps to combat it, our skin may pay the price. Chronic stress can make our skin more sensitive as our body releases stress hormones and thus may make us more susceptible to infections and skin reactions. Too, when we're stressed we typically [sleep poorly](#) which can cause higher levels of inflammation, causing our skin to look less than ideal with the appearance of acne, dark circles, or under-eye bags. It's important that we find an outlet in times of stress – whether that's exercise, meditating, or simply calling a friend, because we know stress doesn't only affect our skin, but our body in its entirety.

For me, the 3 biggest things that seemed to help my skin when I started getting serious about improving its health were skin protection in the form of sunscreen, proper clothing, paying attention to the time and length I was outdoors, staying hydrated, and getting 7-8 hours of sleep at night. I'll also continue to watch my diet, exercise regularly, and do my best to manage any stress that comes my way, as I know these factors too may have a lasting effect on my skin. By following these steps, I hope to continue to get clean bills of health each year at the dermatologist, and to keep the one scar I have, the only one. Are you curious about a new freckle, mole, or a changing one? Check out the [Skin Cancer Foundation's](#) website on how and what to look for in a mole or freckle – it certainly could save your life.