



Here's the Skin(ny)—The Importance of Skin Integrity As We Age

No, I am not talking about weight; I am talking about the largest organ on your body, your skin. As we age, the skin, like every other organ in our body, begins to decline. While we don't have any way to reverse this aging process there are things that we can do to boost it functioning and help to prevent skin integrity issues, a major complication for many seniors.

What does skin do for us?

- Helps maintain proper body temperature
- Wards off infections
- Waterproof barrier that keeps moisture in and moisture out.
- Provides sensory information about our environment and injury

As the body ages, the layer of fat under the skin starts to disappear as well as the blood vessels feeding the skin with lots of oxygen. As a result the skin becomes looser, unable to insulate us well, and thinner. The most visible evidence of this is wrinkling and sagging of the skin. As our skin becomes thinner, it becomes vulnerable to tears and pressure sores. Open skin is an invitation to infection and discomfort.

Risks Factors:

Diabetes – it is under-diagnosed and under-treated, so make sure you are checking for it regularly with your health care provider. Diabetes causes decreased blood flow to the skin and extremities, encouraging the formation of wounds where there may be pressure points. To make matters worse, it makes the body less efficient in healing wounds, once they have developed.

Immobility—Any condition that requires someone to be in bed or confined to a wheelchair for long periods of every day will increase the need to be especially vigilant for skin problems. Daily skin checks for tears and sores are essential. Also, making sure that skin is kept clean and dry is essential. If moisture is a problem, check with your health care provider about the use of barrier creams.

Hip fracture—In otherwise health and active people, hip fractures can cause long periods of immobility during the healing and rehabilitation process. This immobility can increase chances of developing a bed sores.

Dementia—Dementia can contribute to problems with overall skin integrity due to nutritional factors. Not remembering to eat or prepare balanced meals can cause a drop in weight and nutrients essential to the maintenance of the skin. Additionally, inadequate nutrition can contribute to a higher incidence of falls (weakness from low blood sugar and not enough calories) which can open the skin and lead to infection.

Rapid weight loss— The lack of 'padding,' coupled with the underlying cause for weight loss, i.e. poor nutrition or disease, can be problematic for skin integrity.

Cancer— During treatment, immunity is compromised, appetite may decline, and chemotherapy can directly affect the condition of the skin. Special care should be taken to avoid a skin tear and to try to make sure that food and liquid intake is maintained as much as can be tolerated.

Smoking or history of smoking—Decreases blood supply to the skin.

Neurological damage—This can decrease ability to sense discomfort at pressure points that would otherwise prompt one to shift positions.

What you can do NOW

Nutrition is one of the best defenses against skin break-down. No matter what your current health status, making an appointment with a dietician is a great way to make sure you are getting the adequate nutrition you need to provide your skin the opportunity to keep working for you, not against you.

Nutritional factors that can help maintain skin integrity:

- Stay hydrated
- Eat a balance diet that includes protein
- Include healthy fats in your diet
- Make sure you are getting enough Vitamin A, C, E, K and minerals zinc, iron and copper

While there is no cure for what age does to our skin, there are things that we can do to keep it in the best possible condition to help protect us when we are our most vulnerable.

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