The best foods for clear skin

By Gabriella Boston, Published: September 18

We’ve heard of problem skin being treated with everything from salicylic acid to antibiotics.

But yogurt and blueberries, flaxseed and salmon?

Nutrition plays a key role in skin health, says Meagen McCusker, associate professor of dermatology at the University of Connecticut Health Center.

“It’s really true that you are what you eat,” says McCusker, adding that the condition of your skin often tells a story about your overall health and well-being.

No wonder, then, that sugar — a culprit in many health problems including diabetes and obesity — is also involved when it comes to skin health.

“Foods that keep your blood sugar low are also good for the skin,” McCusker says. “The first thing I tell people is avoid sugar — which includes refined sugar and high-fructose corn syrup — and processed foods.”

Not only can sugar cause inflammations in the body, but it also adversely affects cell membranes and by extension can break down collagen, she says. Collagen is a type of protein that helps make the skin elastic.

Juliet Rodman, a D.C. dietitian and co-founder of Corporate Wellness Solutions, agrees.

“Stay away from anything that comes in a box,” she says, “both because of the added sugars and because of other additives.”

Instead, she says, gobble up produce of all colors, plus nuts and seeds, to get minerals, fiber and vitamins A, C and E.

For example, she says, nuts and dark green leafy vegetables are full of zinc. Kale is good for vitamins A and C. And sunflower seeds and almonds are packed with Vitamin E.

Nuts also provide healthful fats and proteins — another important aspect of healthy skin, says Alan Dattner, a New York dermatologist and owner of www.holisticdermatology.com.
“For example, omega-3 fatty acids, which are found in wild salmon, help support healthy cell membranes,” says Dattner, who has been treating skin conditions with holistic therapies, including nutrition counseling, for 30 years.

McCusker also suggests grass-fed beef, fish oil and flaxseed for healthful fats and proteins.

Another smart move is the addition into the diet of probiotics, which can be found in yogurt and kefir as well as nutritional supplements. (She prefers supplements over yogurt because they contain much higher amounts of probiotics.) There is evidence, McCusker says, that probiotics not only help digestive tract health but also help make skin healthy and happy.

Other than yogurt and kefir, dairy is not recommended, she says.

“From an evolutionary standpoint we don’t need dairy once we are weaned,” she says. “And for many people with acne, dairy can worsen the condition.”

Instead, drink plenty of water.

“The skin is a little like a third kidney. If you don’t have enough water flushing through it, it doesn’t work well,” Dattner says.

Rodman adds that hydration becomes even more important for the skin as we age and consequently dry out. “Dehydration tends to shrink the skin,” she says.

In the end, healthful food for you skin — the kale, flax, wild salmon, nuts and seeds as well as limited amounts of processed food and dairy — is what’s healthful for the rest of you, too.

“It’s about taking a logical approach to skin and nutrition,” Rodman says. “When you promote good skin, you promote overall good health.”

In addition to healthful food and hydration, promoting good skin requires a holistic approach. Keep an eye on stress, physical activity levels and sleep, and protect your skin from too much sun and environmental hazards, Dattner says, adding that any therapy — whether it’s based on high-tech pharmaceuticals or holistic lifestyle change — takes time.

Remember, he says, some people have spent a lifetime on antibiotics to prevent breakouts. So don’t expect glowing skin after a week of clean living, he says.

“If you have had bad habits — including bad nutrition — for 15 years, it’s not realistic to expect changes in two to three weeks,” he says. “But start moving in a sensible direction — eating less sugar and more vegetables — and begin to identify what makes a difference for you.”

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