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#1 SECRET TO YOUNGER SKIN

The key to a perfect complexion? Making sure it's tough enough to take anything life dishes out. By Liz Krieger

There's a war going on in this country, waged against your skin. Every day, in bathrooms and dermatologists' offices, women are scrubbing, rubbing, lasering, and peeling their face in the hope that inflicting just the right amount of damage will spur healing and that skin will end up looking better than before. But growing numbers of skin-care experts are calling for a truce, in large part because we finally understand that to have youthful, glowing skin, you first need strong, repaired skin. "Of course, this doesn't mean you should never exfoliate or look to lasers to help improve your skin," says Santa Monica dermatologist Karyn Grossman. "You just need to find a careful balance so that you are strengthening your skin between brief—not chronic—episodes of 'controlled damage.'" So put down your weapons and get smart about the four ways you can get your healthiest, most beautiful skin ever.

BUILD UP THE BARRIER

Skin not only protects everything inside but also suffers most from what's going on outside, says Geoff Genesky, head of Kiehl's Skin Care Laboratory in New York. Pollution, wind, smoke, sun, and other elements take a toll on how skin looks and functions, he says. If that barrier is damaged, skin will appear dry, dull, or rough and be more prone to irritation, sun damage, premature aging, and bacteria, says physician Philippe Allouche, head of creation, innovation, and research at cult skin-care favorite Biologique Recherche. "And popular laser and peeling treatments can further break down an already weak skin barrier," he adds.

To safeguard the barrier, powerful antioxidants are your best bet. "Antioxidants scavenge free radicals created during exposure; when free radicals get into the skin, they attack collagen and elastin," explains dermatologist Elizabeth Hale, a cofounder of CompleteSkinMD in New York. About 85 percent of skin's free-radical damage comes from the sun, adds internist Charlene DeHaven, clinical director of Innovative Skincare.

To cover your bases, look for products that contain a mix of antioxidants, says DeHaven, including fat-soluble ones (like vitamins A and E) and water-soluble ones (e.g., vitamin C), as both types nourish different parts of a skin cell. Vitamin A is the perennial dermatologist pick for addressing pretty much every aging issue; it's found in both over-the-counter retinol and prescription products like Retin-A. "Vitamin A makes its way down into the second layer of the skin—the dermis—where it can activate fibroblasts to create collagen, which builds up the skin," says Benjamin Fuchs, a skin-care chemist in Boulder, Colorado, and founder of Truth Skin Health Products.

For optimal results, apply antioxidant-rich topicals every morning and evening after cleansing, says Hale. (And it goes without saying, always follow with sunscreen in the morning.) Serums, which are suitable for all skin types, absorb quickly and often contain the highest concentrations of active ingredients. Recent

Beauty BAZAAR

research reveals that antioxidants should also be used immediately after prolonged sun exposure, adds Hale. "Studies have shown that damage continues to occur for six hours after sun exposure," she says.

GREAT BUYS: Innovative Skincare Youth Serum (\$150; 4), Truth Skin Health Products Truth Serum (\$199; 1), Fresh Seaberry Skin Nutrition Booster (\$45; 5), Algenist Genius Ultimate Anti-Aging Vitamin C+ Serum (\$115)

BOOST GROWTH AND REPAIR

Protecting your skin from daily life or keeping it plump looking is not enough. Ideally, you give it what it needs to grow stronger from the inside out. That's why ingredients like peptides and growth factors, which stimulate collagen production, are so promising, says Grossman. One recent study found that twice-daily application of a growth factor was able to significantly reduce under-eye bags after only three months.

Perhaps even more exciting is the growing body of research on DNA repair enzymes. "Each of us already has these enzymes in our body," says Beverly Hills dermatologist Ronald Moy, creator of DNAEGF Renewal skin care. Unfortunately, around age 30, levels start to decline. New studies have shown that using topical products with DNA repair enzymes can actually reverse some of the effects of sun damage to prevent precancers, as well as help thicken collagen, says Moy.

GREAT BUYS: Cosmedix Cell ID Intensive Defense Serum (\$100), DNAEGF Renewal Regeneration Serum (\$145; 6), Neova DNA Total Repair (\$99), Perricone MD OVM (\$165)

FEED THE FOUNDATION

It's uncanny—ask any doc or skin expert to describe what keeps tissue supple and he'll start yammering about bricks and mortar. The analogy goes like this: The epidermis is made up of cells (a.k.a. bricks) and fats between them (a.k.a. mortar). That mortar is the glue that holds the whole "wall" together. When the wall is intact, your skin is bouncy and resilient, says Harold Lancer, a dermatologist in Beverly Hills. But when there's not enough mortar—due to environmental factors or poor diet or a lack of moisturizing skin-care products—the wall will become inflexible and the skin barrier will be weakened, says Keshan Gunasinghe,

associate director of global face research and development for Neutrogena.

To rehydrate the skin and replenish those spaces between the cells, you need a combination of lipids, says Hale. Nourishing your skin via dietary sources such as salmon and other fatty fish is important, but you really need products with moisturizing ingredients like ceramides, shea butter, and fatty-acid-rich botanical oils, plus, adds Gunasinghe, potent humectants like hyaluronic acid, which can hold 1,000 times its weight in water.

GREAT BUYS: Neutrogena Hydro Boost Water Gel (\$18; 3), Olay Total Effects Daily Moisturizer SPF 30 (\$18), Kiehl's Daily Reviving Concentrate (\$46; 2), Shiseido Ultimune Eye Power Infusing Eye Concentrate (\$65), Chantecaille Bio Lifting Cream (\$298)

KEEP IT IN BALANCE

The concept of pH continues to get a lot of attention these days, notably in the diet arena, with proponents touting the benefits of ingesting foods that are more alkaline than acid (7 is neutral on the pH scale). When it comes to your skin, though, the opposite is true. "Your skin is naturally acidic, with a pH of 4 to 5.5," says Marisa Vara Arredondo, founder of Phace Bioactive, a line of pH-optimized skin care. She's talking about the acid mantle, a thin film on the outer layer of the skin, one that works as a built-in antioxidant, protecting underlying skin from oxidative damage, regulating moisture levels, and helping guard against damage from environmental factors such as wind, and wind, and against the bacterial growth that leads to blemishes and inflammation. But when you use products that are too alkaline—notably soaps and cleansers that are harsh and stripping—you tear down your skin's own defense and make it harder for the other products you're using to do their job. In fact, in a 2010 study in the *British Journal of Dermatology* that tracked women's skin over an eight-year period, those with alkaline skin tended to have more fine lines compared with those with acidic skin.

Don't worry if the pH level isn't labeled on your favorite cleanser or cream. An easy way to tell if a product you're using is too alkaline is to gauge how it feels immediately after cleansing, says Hale. The worst culprits are often soaps, not moisturizers, she notes. "Products that are too harsh can leave your skin feeling stripped and almost squeaky-clean."

GREAT BUYS: Phace Bioactive Detoxifying Gel Cleanser (\$38), Cetaphil Gentle Skin Cleanser (\$14), Phisoderm Fragrance Free Cream Cleanser (\$4.99), Murad Resurgence Renewing Cleansing Cream (\$36)

BOTTOM LINE: For the youngest-looking skin, baby your face. ■

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