For most of us, much of the time, the condition of our skin proclaims our age. But the wrinkles, discoloration, and altered texture of our skin are not so much the inevitable result of growing older; rather, they are the evidence of the cumulative damage of years of exposure to sun, stress, pollutants, and poor diet. The years do matter—but it is the damage done to the skin over those years that matters more. Happily, preventing much of so-called “aging skin” is a choice and restoring damaged skin is an option as well, explain Dr. Elizabeth Hamilton, Dr. Amy Stein, and Physician Assistant Julie Dodge, of Regional Dermatology of Durham.

AGING AND THE SKIN

All levels of the skin change with the beginning of skin laxity, or looseness. “Our connective tissue breaks down over time, and we don’t replenish it at the same rate that we lose it,” explains Dr. Hamilton. “Thus, over a lifetime, our skin gets thinner. This change is most obviously seen on the back of the arms where people bruise more easily as they age. The connective tissue in and around the skin and blood vessels protects us from trauma.”

Dr. Stein adds that with thinning skin, with the slightest trauma you’ll see more bleeding under the skin, which can be worsened by medication, such as blood thinners. And in the face, typically collagen and elastin are lost, as well as volume and bone. “That’s why we see more sagging skin and loss of volume as we age.”

Almost everyone will see their skin get drier and more reactive as they age. “And there’s no set age,” notes Dr. Hamilton. “It happened to me in my thirties; for some people it happens when they’re 90. I tease people saying that the skin, just like you, gets more particular the older it gets.”

DRY, ITCHY SKIN AND ROSACEA

Age does influence certain skin conditions, Dr. Hamilton notes. “When people complain about dry, itchy skin, they have quite possibly developed a variety of allergies or sensitivities over time. We can address these issues, but it’s much like when your car gets old—maintenance goes up. And as you get older, you can maintain skin health and appearance to a certain extent, but it requires more effort to do so.”

Rosacea, a condition that causes redness and visible blood vessels, as well as small, red, pus-filled bumps, is another example of a skin condition that may be exacerbated as we grow older, Dr. Hamilton explains. “Rosacea has little tolerance for certain products. ‘Patients may try benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid washes—which they used when they were younger and had pimples—but rosacea doesn’t respond to typical acne medicines. Obviously, not everyone who has rosacea had acne growing up, but they assume pile medication will work. In fact, treating rosacea effectively requires a totally different approach. And that approach will change with the patient’s age.’”

AGING SKIN AND CANCER

“Then there are patients who come in assuming that the spots all over their face are from aging,” notes Dr. Stein, “but actually are pre-cancer spots. Precancers are a common result of long-term sun damage and it’s important to attend to these so that they don’t become cancerous. There are various ways to treat them, most commonly with liquid nitrogen. Or we can prescribe a topical medication to use at home. There are also in-office treatments, that clearly reverse, but not eliminate, many of those changes from past transgressions. These need to be treated because they can develop into skin cancer and leave scars for life.”

“Sun, smoking, stress

“The big three contributors to aging skin,” comments Ms. Dodge, “are sun, smoking, and stress. And exposure to all three over many years compounds the problems they create. Smoking causes gray, pale, and wrinkled skin. Stress has many causes—from chronic pain or illness to demanding work to traumatic life events. Whatever the source, over time it takes a toll. People who have dealt with a lot of pain and stress in their life just seem older. Obviously, how well you take care of yourself is reflected in your skin.”

And sun damage, all three concur, is probably the single greatest contributor to “aging skin.” The doctors of course recommend sunscreen, but acknowledge that patients don’t always use it. Sun damage cannot be reversed, they note, but further harm can be prevented.

COSMETIC EFFECTS OF AGING

“There’s definitely a cosmetic component to aging,” acknowledges Dr. Hamilton. “The skin changes as you get older. People with skin problems often tell me that they’ve used a particular skin product all their life without problem and can’t understand why it should bother them now. The problem is that their skin isn’t the same as it was in the past. People resist changing their routine, even when they can see their skin is breaking down. I tell them that their itchy skin is saying that it doesn’t like the way you’re taking care of it.”

Ms. Dodge recalls a patient asking why her office has a variety of skin care products in the waiting room. “She wanted to know if we were getting away from medical dermatology and becoming a cosmetic dermatology practice?” I replied that many people want to continue taking care of their skin as they age; they’ve realized that they created a problem when they were younger by getting too much sun, or applying baby oil and iodine to get a tan, or doing many other things they weren’t supposed to do. Now they want to continue to feel good about themselves and age gracefully. It’s those patients who are looking for cosmetic procedures and products to help reverse past damage. Unlike patients who have taken care of their skin, worn sunscreen, and still look great, these people face added challenges to retain and maintain attractive skin.”

COSMETIC TREATMENTS

“Medical dermatology is our focus and, while we are not a full-service cosmetic practice,” explains Dr. Hamilton, “we offer patients many options to address cosmetic problems, including laser treatments to remove brown spots from the face, hands, arms, and extremities. Those are not new treatments, but are effective and relatively inexpensive.”

“We have Retinols, Retinoids, Vitamin C, and other products to improve skin texture and appearance. Another procedure, short of plastic surgery, is microneedling to increase collagen. If someone needs something more dramatic, there are other laser technologies. Chemical peels correct skin irregularities, have minimal downtime, and can really help with discoloration caused by the sun.”

“Have more 70-year olds getting filler to minimize their wrinkles,” Dr. Hamilton adds. “They’re not trying to look 40, they just want some of their wrinkles to go away so they’ll look better. These cosmetic procedures are not covered by insurance. The easy and inexpensive alternatives are wearing sunscreen and protective clothing when out in the sun.”

EXPECTATIONS

“When it comes to products,” adds Dr. Hamilton, “the most common problem is people having unrealistic expectations for what the product is going to do. For example, we offer Nectifirm, a product that helps the texture and tone of the skin on your neck. It will help, but not for the person coming in with three chins!”

“We have patients who have bags under their eyes and wonder if eye cream is going to help. Eye creams are helpful, but it’s unrealistic to expect them to completely solve severe problems. If your expectation is for less crinkly, more moisturized skin, then you’ll be happy. If you think it’s going to replace blepharoplasty or other facial surgery, you’re wasting your time and money.”