AMANDA ROHDE

Saving Face

Topical antioxidants can help you get your glow on — and keep it.

BY DR. MELISSA SCHWARZSCHILD

Every day within our bodies, there are millions of processes that cause oxidation, or the breakdown of cells. You've witnessed oxidation many times – just think of how iron rusts and an apple slice turns brown when exposed to air.

Oxidation creates free radicals, harmful byproducts that damage cells. Free radicals can also start a chain reaction; cells they damage may produce more free radicals, which may damage even more cells, and so on.

Free radicals essentially speed up the aging process, leading to dry skin, wrinkles (from collagen breakdown), poor skin tone and texture, enlarged pores and mottled pigmentation. By damaging cell DNA they can even lead to skin cancers.

So why don't we all shrivel up and turn brown at a very early age? Well, if you look around at some longtime smokers and sun-worshippers, you'll realize that some of us do! But our bodies are very well made and produce substances called antioxidants whose job it is to stamp out free radicals and prevent cell damage.

But here's the rub: Although our own supply of antioxidants is typically sufficient for the job, external toxins such as sunlight, cigarette smoke, alcohol, pollution, chemicals and, yes, even stress are all free-radical generators. Depending on how many external stressors our bodies face, our own antioxidant supply can become depleted. That's where topical antioxidants can help out.

Antioxidants not only mop up free radicals, but they can also help repair damage already sustained by cells. They're strongly anti-inflammatory, meaning that they help decrease redness. Vitamin C and retinoids are among my favorites because they've been shown to increase collagen production and act as mild bleaching agents.

For skin protection, topical antioxidants offer advantages over oral supplements. Most important, you can get a higher level of protection by applying an antioxidant directly to your skin.

How do you choose one? Read the label. Examples of what to look for include vitamins C and E; retinoids (such as retinol, tretinoin, tazarotene); green tea (perfect for sensitive skin types); idebenone (pricey, yet powerful); coenzyme Q10 and ubiquinone (in many over-the-counter products); and kinetin. Ingredients are listed in order by their weight, so make sure that the antioxidant is found as close as possible to the top of the list. Also look for products that state the active ingredient's concentration.

Topical antioxidants may not reverse the hands of time, but they can go a long way in smoothing wrinkles, removing redness, and making your skin look fresher and more youthful.

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