

Your Skin Unmasked

By Margie Markarian

Find out what's going on beneath the surface.

What do you think is the body's largest organ? It's something that covers each of us from head to toe. And by the time you're an adult, you will have about 8 pounds of it. It's skin!

"It keeps your insides in and the outside out," says Linda Franks, a New York City *dermatologist* (skin doctor) who treats teens. Without skin, you'd look a lot like a piece of meat at the supermarket. Not exactly a pretty picture!

That's not all. "Skin acts as a shield for your body," says Ron Davis, a dermatologist who teaches at Tulane University's School of Medicine in New Orleans.

Skin also helps

- fight off infections,
- maintain body temperature,
- protect the body's organs,
- give us our sense of touch.

Skin's color and texture also helps define what you look like. But its importance is more than just skin deep. Read on to learn more about keeping your skin as healthy as it can be.

Skin Problems

It's easy to take skin for granted until something goes wrong or changes. Rashes, pimples, warts, and athlete's foot are just a few common (and annoying!) skin concerns for teens. "It's hard not to be self-conscious about skin problems," says Davis, because many things that happen to skin affect the way you look.

Most skin problems go away with time, proper skin care, and the help of remedies you can buy at the store. More stubborn or serious skin problems may need a doctor's attention or prescription medicine to help them heal.

Here are some examples of skin problems many teens face, where they come from, why they show up, and how you can take care of them.

Acne and pimples. Hormonal changes in the body trigger more activity in the skin's oil glands during the teen years. Sometimes, the glands produce more oil than the skin needs to stay moist. When that happens, the oil, sweat, bacteria, and dead skin cells can mix together and plug up the *pores* (tiny holes) on your skin's surface. The result can be pimples, whiteheads, blackheads, or full-blown acne.

Rashes. Rashes happen when you come in contact with something that irritates your skin. Rashes are usually red, itchy, warm to the touch, and sometimes bumpy. Allergies to foods, plants, or animals sometimes cause rashes. So do sensitivities to soaps, fragrances, cosmetics, fabrics, chemicals in household products, and even heat from the sun.

Cuts and scrapes. Ever had a small splinter that caused giant-sized pain? a deep cut that bled a lot and needed stitches? Then you probably experienced an injury to the *dermis*, the thicker layer of skin that lies just beneath the exposed layer (the *epidermis*). The dermis is home to nerve endings (that's why a sliver hurts so much) and blood vessels (that's why there is so much bleeding when you get a deep cut).

Warts. Warts are raised lumps of skin and are usually found on hands and feet. They are caused by viruses. Warts are usually harmless infections but can be annoying or make you feel self-conscious. Products available in stores can treat warts on hands. Warts on the bottoms of the feet usually need to be removed by a doctor because they make walking uncomfortable.

Bacterial and fungal infections. An opening in the skin can lead to infections from bacteria or a fungus. Athlete's foot is an example of a fungal infection that thrives in dark, moist areas. It spreads easily in locker room showers. Body piercings and tattoos are at a high risk for bacterial infections. That is why piercing and tattooing need to be done under super-sanitary conditions. The body parts that get pierced or tattooed also need to be kept clean during the healing period.

The Keys to Healthy Skin

The surest route to healthy skin is to keep it clean. Experts say to wash your face twice a day with warm water and a mild soap. When acne breakouts occur, try using a cleanser that contains *salicylic acid*. You can also spot treat pimples with an ointment containing *benzoyl peroxide*. Both of those ingredients help fight the bacteria that cause acne breakouts.

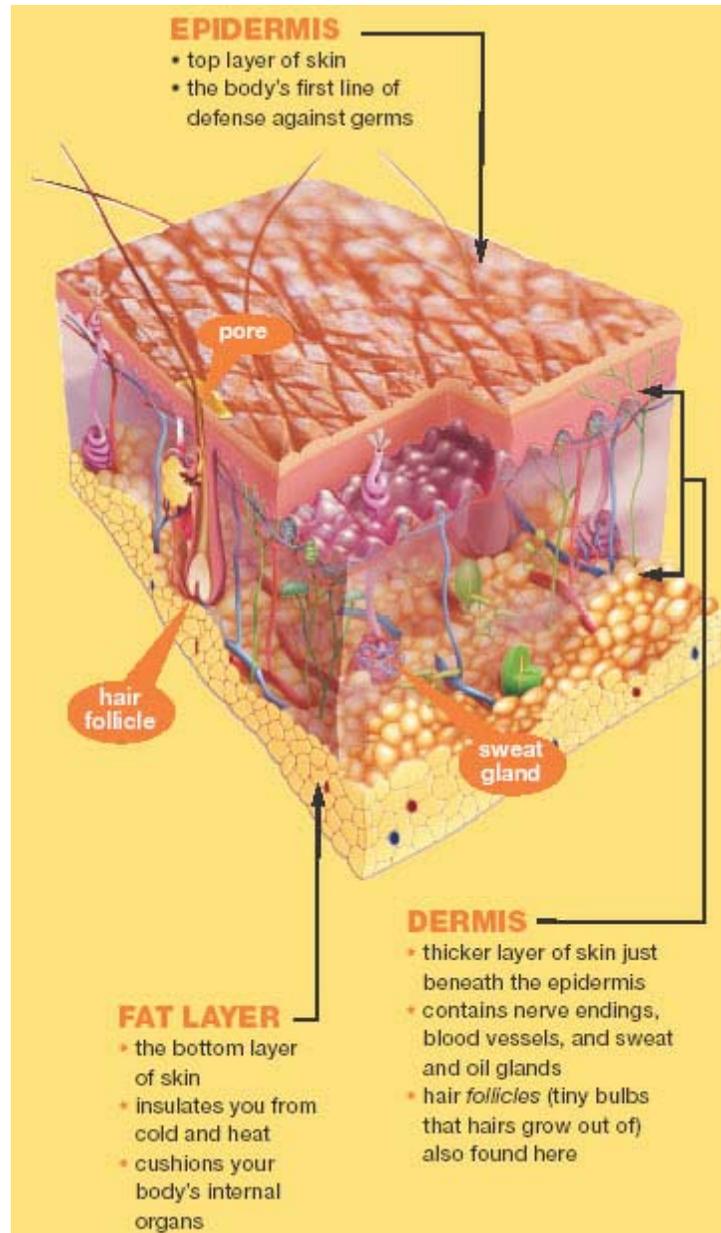
It's natural to want to look your best, but it's also important to be realistic. "It's impossible to have perfect skin—we all have blemishes of some kind," says Ira Skolnik, a Concord, Mass., dermatologist. That even goes for celebrities and models! Many times, magazine photos are changed to make skin look perfect, Skolnik says.

Another key to healthy skin is to always wear sunscreen. "The sun exposure you get before you are 18 years old plays a big role in the health of your skin later in life," says Skolnik. Exposing your skin to the sun (or a tanning bed) without protection can age skin early, and may also lead to skin cancer.

The good news? There is a lot you can start doing right now to ensure that you'll have healthy skin for a lifetime! "If you take care of your skin," says Skolnik, "it will take care of you."

Skin Deep

There's more to skin than what you see on the surface. Here's a look at what goes on in our skin's three layers.



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Miss Florida Teen: Face-to-Face With Skin Cancer

Kayla Collier, 19, will never forget the day she went shopping for a dress to wear to a dance. It was the same day her mother noticed a suspicious spot on her back.



AP Images

"I was in the dressing room trying on a green and gold halter dress," recalls Collier, who was crowned Miss Florida Teen in 2009. "She asked if I had bumped into something or scratched my back because I had a dark brown spot that looked like a rippled scab."

When she showed the spot to a dermatologist, he removed it right away and sent it to a medical lab for testing. She didn't think it was anything to worry about. A week later, however, she was shocked when the test showed she had *melanoma*, a serious form of skin cancer. "I thought, *This can't be happening. I'm only 16 years old.*"

Fortunately, Collier's cancer was caught early. She had surgery to remove it, and the cancer has not returned. But for the rest of her life, she and her doctors will have to check her skin regularly for suspicious moles and growths.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, according to the American Cancer Society. Ultraviolet rays from the sun and indoor tanning equipment are the most common causes of skin cancer. Collier's cancer was likely triggered by both.

"I live in Florida, am fair skinned, and sunburn easily," says Collier. "I always wore sunscreen at the beach but not every time I went out to play and run around in the yard with my brothers."

Collier regrets ever using a tanning bed. She went no more than five times in her life, she says, during the spring of the year melanoma was found. "I wanted to look tan before a pageant," she says.

As part of her Miss Florida Teen platform, Collier frequently talks about preventing teen skin cancer at events sponsored by the American Cancer Society. She has even given speeches to lawmakers in her state about creating laws that would limit teens' use of tanning beds.