



EUROPEAN
ACADEMY OF
DERMATOLOGY &
VENEREOLOGY

Information Leaflet
for Patients



Skin Care in Older Adults; Practical Advice

The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet provides information for older adults and their caregivers about how skin changes with age, common skin problems that may occur, and practical steps to protect and care for the skin. It also explains when to seek medical advice and how dermatologists can help maintain healthy skin throughout older age.

Important disclaimer: This brochure provides general guidance only and is not a substitute for individualized medical evaluation or treatment.

Skin Care in Older Adults; Practical advice

What happens to the skin as we age?

As we get older, the skin undergoes distinctive changes due to aging. The skin becomes thinner, drier, and less elastic, its ability to retain water declines, repair processes slow down, and the skin becomes more fragile and sensitive. The amount of collagen and elastin naturally decreases, blood vessels become more fragile, and the oil and sweat glands produce less moisture. In addition, systemic illnesses and the use of multiple medications can adversely affect barrier integrity, hydration balance, and regenerative capacity.

These changes can lead to:

- Dryness and itching (xerosis)
- Wrinkles and sagging
- Easier bruising and slower wound healing
- Increased sensitivity and irritation
- Age spots and uneven pigmentation
- Long-term sun exposure can speed up these changes, causing additional damage known as photoaging.

How to care for aging skin (daily routine)?

1. Clean gently:

Take short (5–10 minute) showers or baths using lukewarm water.

Avoid traditional soaps; choose fragrance-free, soap-free cleansers that protect the skin's natural lipids. Use a mild emollient cleanser if you have very dry skin or frequent itching.

Wash with your hands or a soft cloth instead of rough sponges or brushes.

After bathing, gently pat the skin dry, do not rub.

2. Moisturize regularly:

Apply a thick cream or ointment within 3 minutes after bathing to lock in moisture, this is known as the "3-minute rule."

Use enough product to cover the entire body and reapply to dry areas during the day.

When applying, follow the direction of hair growth and use only a thin layer in skin folds.

Choose moisturizers containing ceramides, glycerin, hyaluronic acid, petrolatum, lanolin, or low-concentration urea (up to 10%), as these restore lipids, attract water, and reduce transepidermal water loss.

Avoid light lotions: they often contain more water and alcohol, which can worsen dryness in aging skin.

3. Protect from the sun:

Avoid direct sunlight between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. whenever possible.

Wear protective clothing, including long sleeves, wide-brimmed hats, and UV-filtered sunglasses.

Apply a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher to all exposed areas.

Reapply every 2–3 hours, and immediately after sweating or bathing.

For areas with hair thinning or baldness, use UPF 50+ headwear or scalp-safe sunscreen sprays.

Consistent sun protection helps prevent wrinkles, pigment spots, and skin cancer.

4. Stay hydrated and maintain a healthy diet

Drink 1.5–2 liters of water daily, unless otherwise restricted by your doctor.

Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and sources of vitamins A, C, E, zinc, and omega-3 fatty acids.

Avoid smoking and limit alcohol, both of which accelerate skin aging and dehydration.

5. Protect fragile skin from injury:

Wear soft, breathable cotton clothing and avoid wool or coarse synthetic fabrics.

Use gloves when gardening, washing dishes, or using cleaning agents.

Keep fingernails short to avoid scratching fragile skin.

Maintain your home environment at a comfortable temperature (20–22°C) and humidity of 40–50%.

Remove clutter and use adequate lighting to prevent falls or injuries.

Even small skin tears or bruises can take longer to heal with age, so prevention is key.

6. Prevent infection and irritation:

Wash your hands regularly and keep the skin clean and intact.

Clean and cover minor cuts or scrapes immediately.

Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, razors, or nail tools.

Check the skin daily for redness, blisters, or new spots, especially in people with limited mobility or diabetes.

Table. Common Skin Problems in Older Adults and How to Care for Them

Condition	Description	Recommended Care
Dry skin (xerosis)	Skin feels rough, flaky, or itchy, especially on the limbs and back	Apply rich, unscented creams or ointments twice daily, ideally right after bathing
Itching (pruritus)	Often linked to dryness, medications, or internal health conditions	Keep skin well hydrated, cleanse with gentle products, avoid scratching, and consult your doctor if it persists
Easy bruising (senile purpura)	Thin skin and fragile vessels cause reddish-purple patches, mainly on the arms and hands	Protect exposed skin with clothing, minimize trauma, and treat affected areas gently
Age spots and skin tags	Brown flat marks or small skin growths appearing on sun-exposed areas	Usually harmless; seek medical review if they change in shape, size, or color
Intertrigo (skin fold irritation)	Redness or soreness in skin folds due to warmth and friction	Keep folds dry, use barrier creams or absorbent materials, and wear loose cotton clothing
Pressure sores	Red or open spots that form from prolonged sitting or lying	Change position every two hours, maintain skin cleanliness, and use soft padding for support
Fungal infections (e.g., athlete's foot, nail fungus)	Scaling, itching, or thickened nails, often affecting the feet	Keep feet clean and dry, wear breathable footwear, and use antifungal treatment as prescribed
Skin cancer	New or changing growths, spots, or sores that bleed or fail to heal	Examine your skin monthly and schedule yearly check-ups with a dermatologist

Advice for Caregivers:

Older adults may need assistance to maintain healthy skin. Consistent and attentive care can prevent dryness, irritation, and skin breakdown. Caregivers can help by following these principles:

1. Clean . Use lukewarm water and gentle cleansers.

Assist with short, warm baths or showers using mild, fragrance-free products that do not strip natural oils.

2. Moisturize promptly after cleansing.

Apply a rich, fragrance-free cream or ointment immediately after washing to retain skin moisture. Observe for dryness, redness, or scaling, particularly on the legs and arms.

3. Keep skin folds clean and dry.

Carefully dry areas such as under the breasts, groin, and between toes. Persistent moisture in folds can lead to fungal or bacterial infections.

4. Provide barrier protection for incontinence.

In individuals with urinary or fecal incontinence, apply a protective barrier cream (such as zinc oxide or petrolatum) after gentle cleansing to prevent irritation and breakdown.

5. Prevent pressure injuries.

Reposition individuals who are bedbound or wheelchair-bound at least every two hours. Use cushions or soft padding to reduce pressure over bony areas.

6. Support circulation and hydration.

Encourage regular water intake unless restricted and promote light movement or passive limb exercises to maintain blood flow and tissue health.

7. Monitor for warning signs.

Seek medical advice if you observe persistent redness, swelling, open sores, or slow-healing wounds. Early evaluation by a healthcare professional or dermatologist can prevent complications.

When Should You See a Dermatologist?

Although many age-related skin changes are harmless, some may require professional evaluation. You should contact a dermatologist if you notice any of the following:

1. Persistent or generalized itching that lasts more than two weeks despite regular moisturization.
2. New, changing, or irregular moles or spots, especially those that bleed, crust, darken, or grow rapidly.
3. Non-healing wounds, recurrent skin tears, or ulcers, particularly on the legs or pressure areas.
4. Painful, oozing, or crusted lesions, or rashes associated with fever or malaise.
5. Sudden widespread redness, swelling, or burning following the use of a new medication or cosmetic product.
6. Unexplained bruising or fragile skin that worsens over time.

Early assessment can prevent complications and allows timely detection and treatment of conditions such as eczema, infections, drug reactions, and skin cancer.

While every effort has been made to ensure that the information given in this leaflet is accurate, not every treatment will be suitable or effective for every person. Your own clinician will be able to advise in greater detail.