

The Challenge of Retaining Beauty

In a Highly Toxic Environment

Maintaining a youthful, healthy, and realistic physical appearance in what can be a highly toxic environmental and social world can be a daunting task. Accomplishing that feat has long inspired Dr. Cynthia Gregg, one of the area's leading facial plastic surgeons, who creatively incorporates skin care and surgical procedures with her patients. From researched-based topicals to chemical peels, microdermabrasion, laser resurfacing, and plastic surgery, Dr. Gregg has, in fact, focused her professional life on the education and aesthetic rejuvenation of her patients.

TOXICITY AND AGING

The work of rejuvenation requires a deep understanding of the aging process. And, notes Dr. Gregg, “among the many factors contributing to the aging process, toxins—including sun exposure—are the most significant.

“There is a general understanding about the aging process and how it affects our skin from a genetic standpoint,” Dr. Gregg says. “When we age, every layer is affected by our genetics, such as the rate of change in underlying soft tissue, muscle mass, and fat cells, and bones. We do, however, have some control over these genetic components, because environmental and social factors are responsible for accelerating or decelerating these genetic tendencies.”

The simple truth is, she says, “there are right and wrong things you can choose in terms of the health and quality of your skin, such as putting chemicals on your face that are inappropriate for your skin type or consuming unhealthy foods that damage your body and contribute to more quickly aging skin.”

What is the key to understanding how to slow the aging process? As with most things, Dr. Gregg says, the answer is education.

“Toxins come in many forms,” she explains, “and not all of them are obvious. Sun exposure is a great example. These days, virtually everyone knows that sun damage can cause skin cancer. As a result of that understanding, many of us are now wearing sunscreen, which protects the skin from UVA and UVB light.

“But, cancer is not the only concern,” she continues. “Sun damage also accelerates the aging process of the skin—a fact that, surprisingly, fewer people understand. And, what almost no one knows, because we’re learning this from very recent research, is that infrared heat—just the heat itself—has a damaging effect on the skin, as well.”

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Dr. Gregg points out that sun damage to the skin often accumulates quietly, and doesn’t happen solely when you’re at the beach on your summer vacation. “It amazes me that people are surprised that sun damage can happen through the car window, just as it does on the beach. Everyone understands that obvious exposure like tanning beds are detrimental to the skin, but subtleties like driving in the car or taking your kids to the park still elude many of our patients who come in with prematurely aging skin.”

Smoking, of course, is another powerful toxin affecting the aging process of the skin. “Nicotine causes the constriction of blood vessels,” Dr. Gregg explains. “This means less blood flow to the skin and decreased ability of the skin to heal. So, while we all accumulate damage to our skin every day, a smoker’s skin is far less capable of healing and repairing that damage than that of a non-smoker.

“This is why their skin ages more quickly. And that is why I won’t perform a face lift on an individual who actively uses any form of nicotine,” she says. “The risk of complication is simply too high, and the skin won’t heal properly.”

ADDRESSING SKIN DAMAGE

Fortunately, new science-based research is giving the aesthetics industry new tools to slow and even reverse the skin’s aging process. “For example,” notes Dr. Gregg, “there’s been a lot of research looking at the importance of antioxidants—and particularly vitamin C—in protecting your skin. Beyond that, the research is now focusing on rejuvenating the skin at the cellular level—



Dr. Gregg uses the computer as an educational tool to help prospective patients understand the potentials of facial plastic surgery.

both to reverse some of the damage to your skin and to prevent future aging.”

“Epigenetics is an amazing area of interest,” Dr. Gregg says. “We now have products like Alastin, which works at a cellular level to turn off the collagenase enzyme—the enzyme eating up your collagen as you age—and to turn on the gelatinase enzyme, which is responsible for clearing out the junk and toxins that accumulate in the skin. This technology developed from research on wound healing, which is exactly what we’re trying to do when we combat aging: heal the damaged cells.”

And, she adds, “in just the last year another skin care line has come out that’s looking at ways to target stem cells in the skin. The early studies of these products suggest that they can actually stimulate the stem cells to make more skin cells—something we’ve never been able to do before. We’re in a truly remarkable era with respect to skin care and skin healing.”

DO OUR EYES DECEIVE US?

In an environment of digital manipulation and social media, can we truly trust what we see? “One of the biggest challenges we face in the field of plastic surgery is helping our patients understand that what they see and think is real, is a fake reality,” Dr. Gregg says. “And this manufactured ideal they see on-line—and are led to believe is attainable—is what they judge themselves against.

“In fact,” she says, “social media can be considered one of ‘toxins’ challenging us today. The pervasiveness of social media magnifies the age-old problem of altered self-perception and contributes to low self-esteem, leading people to want plastic surgery not just to restore their *own* youthful appearance, but basically to try to look like someone else altogether.”

“Social media sites, such as Facebook, are where our patients are most likely to gather information about their options for facial plastic surgery,” notes Dr. Gregg. “But, a lot of the images and information found on any social media site do not set up realistic expectations, and therefore can have really negative effects on our patients’ expectations and self-esteem.

“Our job,” Dr. Gregg emphasizes, “is not to make judgments. It is simply to listen to what our patients want, and then to educate them about what’s realistically possible so they can feel beautiful, confident, and happy with the face and body they truly have.”

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