

# The Real Secret to Younger-Looking Skin

By Joan Davis | May 18, 2018

**It is possible to have smoother, tighter skin from head to toe—and the answer doesn't come from a tube.**

In our 60s and beyond, we may spend less time worrying about our appearance and more time appreciating the amazing things our bodies can do. But that doesn't mean we can't wish for brighter, firmer skin on our face, arms, and legs.

While countless creams and elixirs promise miraculous antiaging results, they may only scratch the surface of a problem that goes much deeper—literally. “As we age, the outer layer of our skin—the part we see and feel—gets thicker and drier while the inner layer thins, resulting in flakiness, wrinkling, and sagging,” explains Stanley Kovak, M.D., founder of Kovak Dermatology and Laser Institute in Illinois.

Luckily, there's a surprisingly affordable, accessible way to boost your skin's health from the inside out: exercise.

“Exercise generally has a very positive impact on our skin,” says Shari Lipner, M.D., Ph.D., a dermatologist at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and Weill Cornell Medicine. “When we exercise, especially by doing cardiovascular exercise, we're really increasing blood flow and circulation.”

Other skin experts agree. “More blood flow to the area allows more oxygen and nutrients to reach the skin, which makes it easier for your body to generate new, healthy skin cells,” says Neal Schultz, M.D., a dermatologist and founder of BeautyRx Skincare in New York City.

Exercise also helps reduce inflammation in the body, which contributes to wrinkles, dryness, and dullness. While more research is needed on exactly how lowering inflammation through exercise impacts the skin specifically, “generally decreased inflammation is better for the skin,” Dr. Lipner says.

The positive effects may be more than skin deep. A recent study published in the journal *Preventive Medicine* suggests that physical activity may protect our DNA from aging. In the study, highly active adults—engaging in 30 minutes of jogging per day for women or 40 minutes per day for men, five days per week—had longer telomeres, compared to those who were sedentary.

“Telomeres are these little caps on the end of our genetic material that protect chromosomes,” Dr. Lipner explains. “Having a longer telomere is better, but with aging, the telomeres shorten and cells degrade. We know this from many studies,” she says. “While we don't have direct

data from this study on the skin, I think that it really supports exercising at any age. Theoretically, it would affect all our cells, including our skin.”

Want to maximize your workouts for your healthiest skin now? Follow these tips.

**1. Play the Long Game:** It’s important to have realistic expectations. Getting in a few cardio sessions every now and then isn’t going to turn back the clock instantaneously. Dr. Kovak suggests doing 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise three times per week, such as walking, jogging, cycling, or swimming.

“You’ll likely notice results in your skin in about six months,” he says. But don’t let that discourage you: Exercise will immediately make you feel good—and give your skin that rosy, flushed glow.

If you’re starting from zero, start slow and work your way up. “The body doesn’t adapt as well to stress as we get older,” Dr. Schultz says. “You have to increase your activity incrementally.”

**2. Mix Up Your Workouts:** Since blood flow is really the biggest boon to youthfulness, aerobic exercise seems to be the most directly beneficial. But Dr. Kovak adds that strength training can help create the illusion of tighter, smoother skin. “If your muscle is firm and strong, the skin over it is pulled more taut,” he says..

**3. Keep Your Skin Cool and Hydrated:** “If you overdo it and get dehydrated, that can certainly make the skin look older,” Dr. Lipner says. It’s also much easier to overheat as you age because the sweat glands shrink over time. “When your sweat glands don’t work as well, it’s harder to get rid of the heat that your muscles are generating. So you’re more apt to have a problem with overheating,” Dr. Schultz says. (See five sneaky signs you’re dehydrated.)

His recommendation: swimming and water-based exercise. “Water immediately takes the heat away, there’s no tax on the joints from weight, and it’s refreshing.” If you’d prefer to keep your workouts on land, exercise in a cool environment. “It makes it easier for your skin to release the heat,” Dr. Schultz says.

**4. Don’t Let Sun Damage Undo All Your Efforts:** Any good dermatologist will tell you to use adequate sun protection whenever exercising outside. Otherwise, sun damage will negate your gains.

“UV rays are your worst enemy in terms of skin aging,” Dr. Lipner says. It’s true that SPF is the best antiaging product out there. Before you head outdoors—whether for exercise, errands, or leisure—apply water-resistant, broad-spectrum sunscreen with a minimum SPF of 30, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Don’t forget to apply it to your neck and chest!

**5. Remember: It’s Never Too Late to Start:** If you’re hoping to keep skin hydrated, firm, elastic, and smoother for longer, taking preventive action is always the best-case scenario. That means exercising, drinking water, and wearing SPF. Eating antioxidant-rich foods that promote healthier skin can also help.

But there's promising evidence that results can come even if you start getting active later in life, Dr. Kovak says. One small but eye-opening study published in *Aging Cell* found that people ages 65 and older who started doing cardio twice per week ended up with skin that resembled that of someone in their 20s to 40s—with a thinner outer layer and a thicker inner layer—after just three months.