



PAULA'S
CHOICE

Dear Paula,

I recently read about Dr. Obagi's anti-moisturizer theory. He claims that moisturizers actually accelerate the aging process. "With young and healthy skin, the cells in the dermis collect water from the food we eat and water we drink, and deliver that water to the surface of the skin. But, when you apply a moisturizer to hydrate and plump the skin, the skin cells in the epidermis send a message to the cells in the dermis: slow down, we're fat and happy up here. That causes the cells in the dermis to become lazy, go dormant, and the skin becomes drier, thinner, and less elastic." Is this true? This idea has thrown me into a tail-spin! Please help!

Liz, via email

Dear Liz,

I have seen this information from Dr. Obagi too, and was immediately distraught to see a physician stating such fallacy and a quasi-news source printing it without checking for alternate sources and facts. Dr. Obagi is about the only medical professional who believes this nonsense. But let's see if I can help you out of your tailspin.

First, if Obagi is right, any woman could test it out for herself. If you have dry skin, drink lots of water for a few weeks and see if you can then give up your moisturizer. That's simple enough. Of course, all the water in the world won't change your dry skin; drinking more water merely results in needing to use the bathroom more.

The basic premise of Obagi's belief is that water is what moisturizes the skin, and that this water is absorbed from food and drink, eventually making its way to the skin's surface, but that isn't what happens. The studies that have compared the water content of dry skin to normal or oily skin didn't find a statistically significant difference in moisture content between them (Source: *Journal of Cosmetic Chemistry*, September/October 1993, page 249). In fact, too much water (like soaking in a bathtub) can be a problem because it can disrupt the skin's intercellular matrix, where the substances that keep skin cells bonded to each other exist, ensuring that the outer layer of skin is intact, smooth, and is protected from the environment. This matrix is composed of numerous substances that skin needs to function normally and look younger. These substances include glycerin, ceramides, cholesterol, glycosaminoglycans, and various fatty acids. The balancing act



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skin inherently uses to keep itself as normal as possible is considerably more multi-faceted than simply relying on water, not to mention that you can drink gallons of water each day and it won't make dry skin go away like what is possible from using a well-formulated moisturizer. Again, you can do your own test to prove this.

What is thought to be taking place in dry skin is that the intercellular matrix has somehow become impaired or damaged, and that creates water loss. It's not that the skin doesn't have enough water, but rather it doesn't have the ability to prevent water loss (mostly due to sun damage, notice that "young" skin or the parts of your body that haven't seen the sun very much don't have a problem with dry skin), or to keep the right amount of water in the skin cell.

The idea that moisturizers somehow accelerate aging is nonsense (who comes up with this stuff?). There is no research demonstrating that the epidermis signals the dermis that it is "too full of moisture" and that the dermis basically stops "feeding" the skin water to keep it smooth and soft (if that were true, would we dehydrate completely and start looking like dust?). Skin cells in the dermis don't go dormant due to a person using moisturizer, regardless of its formula. On this same principle, someone with oily skin who doesn't use a moisturizer isn't going to age better than someone with dry skin who does use one. It simply isn't about water alone.

What does happen is that years of sun damage and unhealthy habits (such as smoking, applying irritating skin care products, or using tanning beds) literally destroy the supportive tissue and structures that makes up the dermis. That's a huge part of what causes skin to look older. Add to that the issue of fat loss, muscle movement, menopause, growing older, and genetics and you can understand the reasons why skin begins to sag, thin, and become inelastic. Water or moisturizer has no influence on any of this, but a well formulated moisturizer (or whatever you want to call it) can, to some extent, protect from the damage and allow aging skin to look better, longer.

What's particularly egregious about Dr. Obagi's anti-moisturizer statement is that his line sells moisturizers, lots of them! If he truly believes that moisturizers accelerate the aging process then he should cease selling them immediately.