



Your skin. We often call it (affectionately, of course) your birthday suit. It's your body's largest organ, weighing in at roughly eight pounds and covering about 22 square feet. Your skin serves many life-sustaining functions, including protecting you from the outside world and maintaining your body temperature. Each square inch of skin contains millions of nerves that allow you feel touch, pain and pressure.

Many skin changes are just a normal part of the aging process. However, others can signal health problems. It pays to know what is normal and what is not.

You're born with your

BIRTHDAY

SUIT

Take care of it



Normal signs of aging

As you age, your skin becomes thinner and more brittle. It loses strength and elasticity. Because the skin produces less oil, it becomes drier, leading to wrinkles and tiny lines. You may develop new skin growths or pigment spots, especially in sun-exposed areas. Tiny blood vessels in the skin become more fragile, so you may experience bruising or bleeding under the skin.

Warning signs

Unexplained skin changes can be a sign of skin cancer or some other illness. Become familiar with YOUR skin so you can recognize potential warning signs.

- Learn where your moles are and what they look and feel like.
- Be alert for new moles (especially if they look different from your other moles).
- Notice any changes in existing moles or recent skin abnormalities, such as a raised flaky patch, a sore that does not heal or a new, flesh-colored, firm bump.

These changes may indicate skin cancer. Although skin cancer is the most common type of cancer, it's also easily treatable if caught early.

Other unrelated diseases can also cause skin changes, especially as you age. In fact, about 90 percent of older people have some type of skin disease due to an underlying illness, such as heart or liver disease or diabetes, according to the National Library of Medicine. Poor nutrition, obesity and stress can also change your skin.



Protect yourself

You only get one birthday suit, so take care of it. Here are a few tips for preventing damage, premature aging or cancers of the skin.

- Use sunscreen of at least SPF 15 (sun protection factor) to protect you from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. UV radiation is the major risk factor for skin cancers. Re-apply sunscreen every two hours, or more frequently if you are swimming or sweating a lot.
- Check the UV index before you go outdoors. If it's high, postpone your outdoor activities.
- Wear wraparound sunglasses to protect your eyes. Look for full-spectrum lenses, which protect you from both primary types of UV rays.
- Wear protective clothing and a hat to protect yourself from sunburn.
- If you have risk factors for skin cancer (for example, a history of frequent or severe sunburn, fair skin, age over 65, or more than 50 moles or atypical moles), ask your doctor about skin cancer screening. A head-to-toe skin exam should also be part of your annual checkup with your doctor.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Don't smoke. Smoking ages your skin quickly and raises your risk of all types of cancer.
- Be gentle with your skin. Don't take long, hot showers or baths or use harsh soaps. Pat your skin dry and apply moisturizer after bathing.
- If you have diabetes, check your feet frequently for blisters or open sores. Because of diabetes-related nerve damage, you may not feel foot injuries. Left untreated, they can become infected and lead to gangrene or amputation.

DO ONE THING

Get to know your skin. Examine your skin regularly from the top of your head to the tip of your toes and everywhere in between. Learn what is normal for YOU and see your doctor if you notice anything suspicious.