

**A**t first, it seemed random. Raking leaves at her Ottawa home, Wendy Warburton noticed the skin on her thumb had suddenly turned white. Perplexed, she quickly rubbed her hand until colour returned. And, just as quickly, she forgot all about it.

A month later, it happened again. This time, Wendy, a newspaper editor, got it checked out. Her doctor tentatively diagnosed a rheumatic disorder called Raynaud's disease, which makes sufferers susceptible to cold. By the time she saw a specialist, however, the skin on her arms and legs had started to itch constantly.

"He checked me out and said, 'I think you have a much more serious problem than Raynaud's,'" recalls Wendy. "He said I had scleroderma. I had no idea what he was talking about. I had never even heard of it."

# What Is Your Skin Telling You?

Paying attention to subtle changes in your skin (or hair or nails) may allow you to beat emerging health conditions early on.

By Julie Beun-Chown

## The Four S's of Skin Cancer

Despite education efforts by the Canadian Dermatology Association and the Canadian Cancer Society, skin cancer rates are on the rise. "Statistically, an estimated 4,800 Canadians will develop a malignant melanoma in 2008, and 850 will die. In 2007, there were 4,600 new cases," says Dr. Louis Weatherhead, a dermatologist in Ottawa. "I think we're getting better at education, but a lot of people still don't think it'll happen to them."

**To monitor for skin cancer, Weatherhead recommends following the four S's:**

**Size:** Conventional wisdom states that melanomas are five millimetres or more in diameter, but they can be smaller, says Weatherhead.

**Shape:** Note if moles are asymmetrical bumps (not round).

**Surface:** "Watch if any of these moles are breaking down, ulcerating or rough and changing," he says.

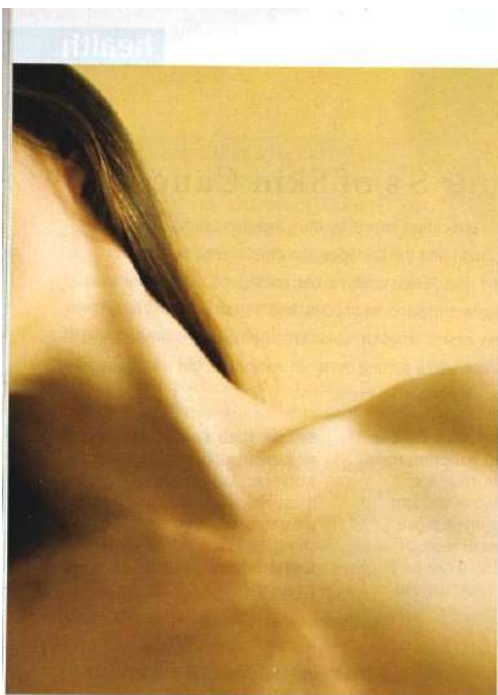
**Sensitivities:** Melanomas can be itchy and/or painful to touch.

Across our entire bodies, our fingertips have the highest concentration of nerve endings.

But Wendy knows all about it now. A serious autoimmune disease, scleroderma is one of a host of health problems that can show symptoms on skin, hair and nails; symptoms we are likely to dismiss as minor complaints. Yet according to Alan Logan, a naturopathic doctor and author of *The Clear Skin Diet* (Cumberland House, 2008), it's a mistake too many of us make.

"The skin has been referred to as the mirror of the internal body, and there's some truth to that," he says. "There may be other, far more serious things going ▶





## Touchy-feely: Every square centimetre of skin has 202 nerve endings.

Here are a few warning signs that should help you detect health issues before they become health disasters.

### "MY FINGERS TURN WHITE AND BLUE IN THE COLD."

Found more often in women than men, Raynaud's disease makes you extremely sensitive to the cold, says Dr. Louis Weatherhead, an Ottawa-based dermatologist and past president of the Canadian Dermatology Association. "It's just a reaction to cold in the hands and feet, but it can be painful."

**Rx:** Manage Raynaud's disease by choosing warm clothing, such as mitts instead of gloves. In severe cases, your doctor will prescribe calcium channel-blockers or vasodilators to improve blood flow. White or blue skin can also indicate tissue disorders if coupled with other symptoms.

### "MY HAIR IS FALLING OUT."

Weatherhead says hair loss, or "telogen effluvium," is typically found in women who have experienced illness, trauma or had a baby, since it is stress related. "Mothers know this. Their hair is never so good as when they're pregnant, then afterward it falls out," he remarks. "It runs a cycle of nine months to a year and a half, and usually comes back to normal."

**Rx:** Try to relax. Check your iron levels. Take supplements if levels are low.

### "I'M 35 AND I HAVE ACNE!"

Think acne is a teenage problem? Not only has the average age of acne sufferers increased from 20 to 26 in the past few decades, says Logan, but 50 per cent of

adult women will have a breakout at some point. Why? In a word, stress.

"One of the reasons more women suffer from acne is stress through work," says Logan. Under stress, the body produces the hormone cortisol, which promotes excessive production of sebum (an oily substance we all produce), therefore clogging pores and encouraging skin inflammation and acne.

**Rx:** "There have been three Harvard studies connecting dairy products to acne, with the exception of yogurt," says Logan. "There are also studies that show that a diet high in fibre, omega 3s, fruit and vegetables is beneficial for controlling acne over three months."

### "MY HAIR IS STRAGGLY AND MY NAILS SPLIT EASILY."

According to Dr. Janice Liao, an Edmonton-based dermatologist, the solution is simple: eat more protein. "If

you're not getting enough protein, it'll show in your hair and nails," she says. "You'll lose hair, or it will be straggly and not grow properly. Your nails will grow slowly and be brittle, breaking off all the time."

**Rx:** Although thinning hair can indicate other conditions, such as thyroid disease, consider the protein in your diet. "It's not the grams of protein; it's the quality of the protein," Liao says. "You need essential sulphur-containing amino acids for good hair, skin and nail growth." Good sources include eggs and oily fish, such as mackerel, wild salmon and sardines.

### "I HAVE LITTLE, YELLOW BUMPS ON MY EYELIDS AND UNDER MY EYES."

Painless and noncontagious, eyelid xanthomas are tiny cholesterol deposits that develop within the skin, says Dr. Karen Dover, a laser and cosmetic ►

on under the skin, yet we tend to dismiss those little bumps and lesions as unimportant."

Before long, Wendy, 57, was experiencing other symptoms – aching joints, erupted blood vessels around her cuticles and rust-coloured discoloration on her arms. Determined to fight back, she moved off a stressful, management-oriented track at work; took up yoga and tai chi; and started eating healthier and getting more sleep. Since she acted decisively, her disease, which can seriously affect internal organs, is under control.

"I think I caught it early enough and decided that it wasn't going to change my life," she says. "But it made me realize that if there's anything on your skin, pay attention, because it's a barometer of what's going on inside."

What are *Homemakers'* secrets for keeping their skin healthy and beautiful during the cold, dry months of winter? Find out at [homemakers.com](http://homemakers.com).

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## Skin Care in Dry Winter Air

**True or false: Dry skin is a result of not drinking enough water.** Not necessarily true, says Dr. Karen Dover, a laser and cosmetic medicine specialist in Ottawa. "We get dry skin in winter in part because the relative humidity is diminished," she says. "Lower humidity, added to your sun and wind exposure, will alter the skin's barrier function and its ability to protect the body."

**Here are Dover's tips for ensuring you have smooth, moist and healthy skin throughout the winter to decrease skin's moisture loss.**

- Run a humidifier in your home throughout the winter.
- Unless you have oily skin, take warm rather than hot showers.
- Apply a good moisturizer within three minutes of bathing or showering. "It maximizes the absorption of the moisturizer and ultimately the protective benefit," she says. "The moisturizer also wears off with exfoliation, so reapply it throughout the day."
- Buy a top-quality moisturizer. "A good moisturizer should have three essential components. First it should have an occlusive, such as petrolatum, silicone or lanolin, depending on skin type. This significantly decreases the loss of moisture from the skin," she says.

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"There should also be a humectant, such as propylene glycol, which draws fluid from your body up to the skin's surface, giving your skin that plump feeling, while diminishing wrinkles. Finally, an emollient, such as jojoba, fills in the crevices and creates that smooth and silky textural sensation."

The healthier your skin as you head into winter, the better your chances of enduring the season with comfortable, beautiful skin. For very dry skin on arms and legs, Dover recommends Cetaphil Daily Advance. To keep your face well moisturized, she suggests Moisturizing Soufflé from Skin Effects (with SPF 30) or creams by Vivier, Jouviance, La Roche-Posay or Aveeno.

medicine specialist in Ottawa. The bumps may look harmless, but plasma lipid studies show that 40 per cent of women with eyelid xanthomas may also have elevated cholesterol levels. If these appear on other parts of your body, however, they can also indicate elevated triglyceride levels.

**Rx:** You can have eyelid xanthomas treated cosmetically by a dermatologic surgeon, but if you are also experiencing a major outbreak of these xanthomas elsewhere on your body, "you should have your lipid profile assessed," advises Dover, "including cholesterol levels, triglycerides and lipoproteins, to rule out serious, yet treatable, disease. Then you can take care of the cosmetic issues."

#### **"HELP! I SPROUTED A BEARD!"**

It could be no more than a genetic trait, but if your unwanted facial hair is coupled with pimples and a weight gain,

you may need more than a depilatory cream. In fact, you could be at risk of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal disorder that affects five to 10 per cent of women, and is linked to insulin resistance, infertility and up to a 70 per cent risk of miscarriage.

**Rx:** Your doctor can prescribe drugs to treat hirsutism (abnormal hair growth) and acne, but exercise and diet are also critical, says Dr. Jeremy Groll, a reproductive endocrinologist and author of *Fertility Foods* (Fireside, 2006). To manage PCOS, Groll recommends a low-fat diet with a gram-for-gram ratio of lean protein to complex carbohydrates, as well as increased vegetable and omega-3 fatty acid intake and regular weight-bearing and aerobic exercises. "Your skeletal muscle is the most insulin-sensitive," he says, "so by improving lean muscle mass, you have more tissues to have that metabolic effect." **hm**