

Beauty

Let's face it

Here's a dermatologist's take on the effectiveness of store-bought anti-wrinkle and whitening products. By Ruth Loh

MANY WOMEN WILL TRY ANY PRODUCT THAT PROMISES THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH. But dermatologist Dr Wang Yi Shi, Consultant, Department of Dermatology, Changi General Hospital (CGH), warned against expecting too much from something in a bottle.

"Anti-wrinkle products can delay the signs of ageing, but not prevent or banish wrinkles. Only plastic surgery can do that," Dr Wang said, adding that wrinkles, such as smile lines and crow's feet, are formed by facial expressions and appear with age, sometimes by the early

or late 30s. The facial skin, once taut over bones, also sags because of a loss in bone mass, which changes the facial skeleton.

Creams, glorious creams

As for whitening products, she said: "No matter how much you use, they won't make you as fair as Nicole Kidman, unless that is your constitutive colour – the natural colour of your skin not exposed to the sun."

Vitamin A derivatives, which have some effect on skin, are found in many beauty products.



PRACTISING WHAT SHE PREACHES

Dr Wang Yi Shi, Consultant, Department of Dermatology, Changi General Hospital, lets us in on her personal beauty secrets.

CLEANSING: "I use a cleanser to wash off soap and grime, but it doesn't make a big difference what you use. Go for something affordable which suits your skin type. Teens with oily, pimple-prone skin can use something stronger than what older women with drier skin can."

NIGHT CREAMS: "I use a prescriptive vitamin A cream two to three times a week at night. It unclogs pores to prevent acne. I started using it in my 20s when I was acne-prone. It also speeds up the turnover of skin, and slows

down the appearance of wrinkles and fine lines. It can make your skin more sensitive to the sun, so you can't use it in the day and go out into the sun. I also use an alpha-hydroxy acid cream two to three times per week to exfoliate and remove dead skin cells."

SUNBLOCK: "Mine is an inexpensive, off-the-shelf sunblock."

EXTRAS: "I have intense pulse light done once every six months. It's like a photo facial for skin rejuvenation and is supposed to help with uneven pigmentation."



Dr Wang Yi Shi: "My advice to those who want to stay fair is to use a sunblock, avoid the sun and apply vitamin A cream at night."

So does this mean we need to swipe all the beauty products from our dressing table? Not necessarily.

Dr Wang said many products are "decent", produced by reputable companies and have some anti-wrinkle effect.

They contain small amounts of ingredients found in more potent prescriptive products, such as pigment lightening creams given for conditions like melasma (also known as the mask of pregnancy) to combat brown patches on the face. Because of this, off-the-shelf products may have fewer side effects but are less effective.

"However, beauty companies often tout their special ingredients as the next big thing, for example, stem cells which they claim can alter genes in the skin.

In theory, it sounds good, but there is very little science behind it."

Vitamin A remedy

The only scientific study she is aware of is on vitamin A derivatives, which are used widely in beauty products. "They have been shown to have some effect in delaying

the signs of ageing, by slowing down the degeneration of collagen and elastic tissue in the skin," she said.

"Retinoids (vitamin A-derived topical agents) have undergone medical studies published in journals and are considered credible. Retin-A must be prescribed, but the gentler vitamin A creams can be bought off the shelf."

Other active ingredients in anti-wrinkle creams are antioxidants such as vitamins C and E, glutathione and alpha-hydroxy acids (fruit acids) such as glycolic acid and lactic acid. Antioxidants are thought to slow down the damage in skin cells, while fruit acids exfoliate dead skin, leaving the complexion more radiant.

Staying fair

Whitening products, besides vitamin A, usually also contain vitamin C, alpha-hydroxy acids, liquorice and kojic acid (a natural skin lightener derived from mushrooms).

Dr Wang's tips on...

Beauty myths

Expensive creams are better: "Not necessarily. What matters is that you are comfortable with the product."

Start young, stay young: "You can't delay wrinkles by using anti-wrinkle creams when you're young. Teens and 20-year-olds have natural oils in their skin and often don't need a moisturiser in humid Singapore."

Other products

1 Steroids for whitening: "While they temporarily make you fairer, they should be used only under medical supervision."

2 Oral tablets: "There's not enough evidence to suggest they have any direct benefits."

3 Eating collagen: "There is no evidence that eating collagen will infuse your skin with it. The only way is to use fillers."

4 Fillers: "A mixture of hyaluronic acid and animal collagen is injected into the skin to fill out sagging areas of the face, or create a more pronounced chin. The effect can be dramatic."

5 Lasers and intense pulse light: "Lasers penetrate, heat and tighten collagen. It can result in subtle to mild improvement."

"While store-bought products can lighten most common pigmentation problems, they seldom completely clear them," said Dr Wang.

"Often, the fairness women achieve is because they avoid the sun. My advice to those who want to stay fair is to simply use a sunblock, avoid the sun and apply a vitamin A cream at night.

"Sun protection also cuts your risk of skin cancer and protects against early wrinkling," she said. For those who enjoy sea sports or are out in the sun for long periods of time, a sunblock of at least SPF 30 is recommended. It must be reapplied every two to three hours, as its effectiveness wears off.

But the flip side of the coin is not getting enough sun. "If that's the case, monitor your vitamin D levels at the doctor's clinic and take a supplement if necessary," she said.