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Skin Supplements

For years, experts laughed at the idea that vitamins and other capsules could improve the skin. But surprising new studies are proving that popping pills may actually lead to a clearer, younger complexion. By Brooke Le Poer Trench

In *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Matrix*, and every road-trip movie in between, swallowing potions and pills is the path to enlightenment. But in real life, it seems more and more women are washing down capsules to clear blemishes, smooth wrinkles, and even repair sun damage. And it turns out that doing so may be an enlightened decision.

Until recently, many dermatologists believed that a healthy diet could enhance skin, but they doubted whether oral vitamins and minerals designed for complexion problems could actually reach their target. Now, many are changing their minds as the clinical and anecdotal evidence mounts. “Increasingly, we’re seeing that prescribing certain supplements for specific issues, when combined with a balanced diet

and the right topical treatments, improves the results patients see in their skin,” says Mary P. Lupo, clinical professor of dermatology at the Tulane University School of Medicine. “And some nutrients can be taken orally as preventive measures against signs of aging, too.”

The real challenge now for anyone interested in treating her skin from the inside out is sorting the hype (drink tea: look younger!) from the facts. “My patients hear about the latest ingredient to show results and buy anything that contains it, assuming that because an ingredient is present, it will be active,” says Richard Fitzpatrick, associate clinical professor of dermatology at University of California–San Diego. But benefitting from supplements is not always so simple. We asked researchers to go down the rabbit hole.

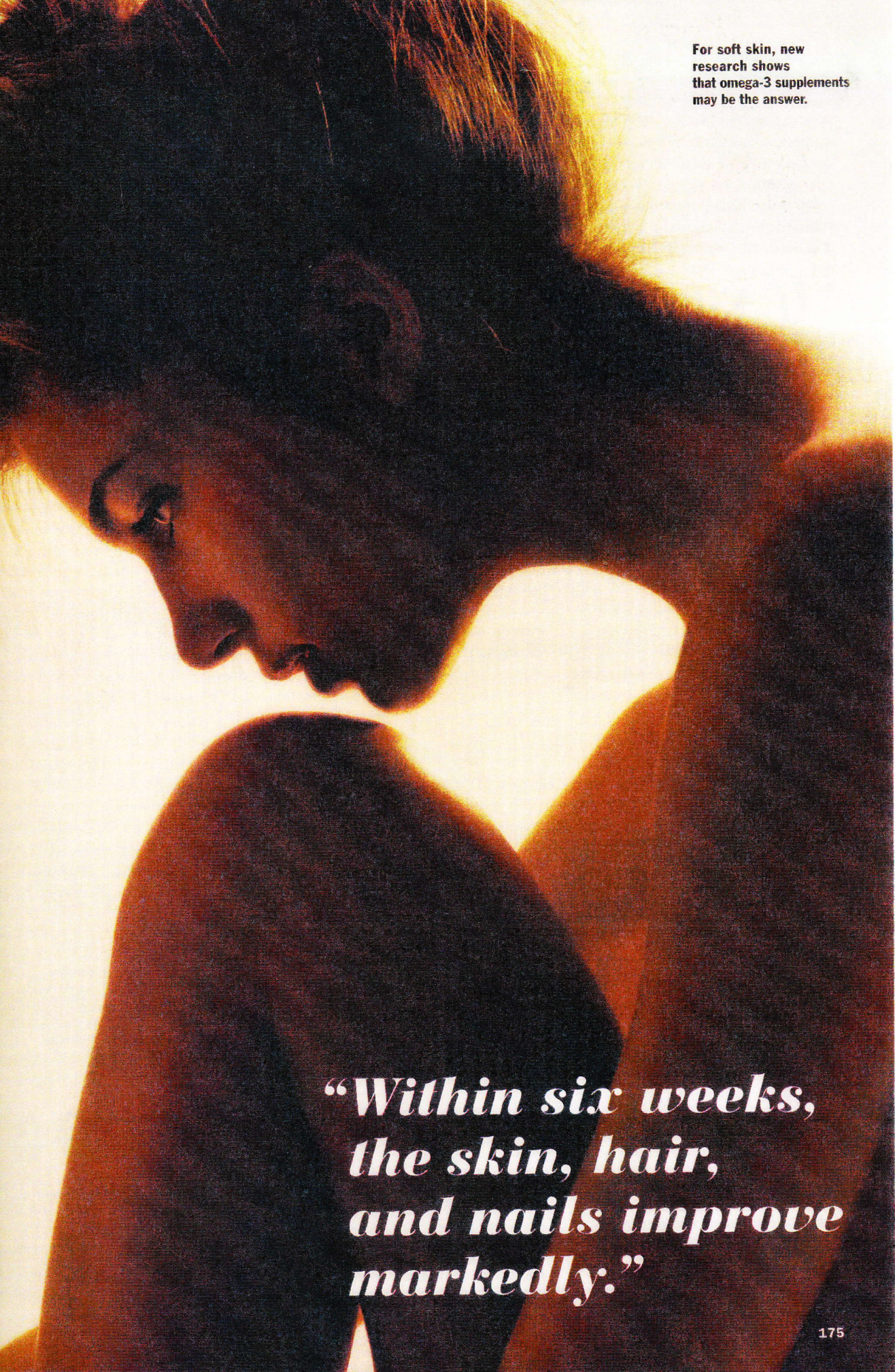
DRY SKIN

THE SUPPLEMENTS: Fish and flaxseed oils
WHAT THEY DO: Essential fatty acids have been used in moisturizers for years. But now dermatologists believe that swallowing capsules of omega-3 fatty acids might smooth dry complexions. “Essential fatty acids are crucial to human health but cannot be made in the body. When taken orally they travel to the skin cells and act as a barrier against environmental allergens and irritants, often improving hydration and skin texture,” Lupo says.

THE PROOF: Small studies show promising results. Canadian researchers prescribed a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids (and antioxidants) to 70 middle-aged women with moderate skin damage, and saw a subtle improvement in skin coarseness within four days. In a British study at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield, 28 patients with chronic psoriasis were treated with either ten fish-oil capsules or placebos daily. After eight weeks, patients who consumed fish oil had significantly less itching and scaling. And a University

of California–Davis study suggests that taking polyunsaturated fatty acids (called essential fatty acids in the supplement aisle) may reduce dehydration and inflammation in skin disorders including psoriasis and eczema.

HOW TO BENEFIT: “I think any skin type benefits from taking fish-oil supplements,” says Andrew Weil, director of the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona and author of *Healthy Aging*. “You can see, within six weeks, the skin, hair, and nails improve markedly.



For soft skin, new research shows that omega-3 supplements may be the answer.

“Within six weeks, the skin, hair, and nails improve markedly.”

And the omega-3 fatty acids are anti-inflammatory too, so they reduce skin dryness and irritation." Sockeye salmon, black cod, and sardines are rich in omega-3—experts recommend two to three servings per week. Tofu, soybeans, omega 3-fortified eggs, and walnuts are also good dietary sources. If intake falls short, omega-3 in fish-

and essential for healthy nails, too. **THE PROOF:** Clinical trials in Switzerland and in the United States produced some impressive data: Almost two-thirds of patients with brittle nails saw them improve after taking biotin. Since then, dermatologists have been recommending the supplement with success, and over the years noted an interest-

for people with severely brittle nails or fragile hair, "doctors have to recommend biotin in a very high dose for patients to see results," Scher says. "It's maybe a thousand times more than the minimum daily requirement—so they must consult their physician to ensure they're taking enough." Some doctors prefer specialized hair vitamins that contain biotin. "A regular supplement should work for those who just want to improve the quality of their hair, because biotin plays a role in keratin production," says Ted Daly, a clinical professor of dermatology who specializes in hair loss at Nassau University Medical Center.

"If you eat a lot of junk food and not a lot of antioxidants, take supplements."

oil capsules can bridge the gap. "It's very important to consume these foods or supplements regularly," Weil says. "It's the cumulative effect of these ingredients that brings benefits."

THE SUPPLEMENT: Biotin

WHAT IT DOES: Popeye got ripped when he ate spinach. Weak nails and brittle hair may gain similar strength from biotin. Scientists aren't exactly sure how it works, but they know the nutrient is a major component in the chemical process of growing hair—

ing effect. "Without prompting, many of my patients were volunteering that the texture of their hair had become noticeably softer," says Richard K. Scher, a dermatologist specializing in nail disorders at Columbia University/Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City. "And while this is strictly anecdotal, 16 years of feedback on this side benefit cannot be ignored."

HOW TO BENEFIT: Most healthy people can get enough biotin from a multivitamin, as well as from a diet that contains corn, soy, egg yolk, and walnuts. But

WRINKLES

THE SUPPLEMENTS: Antioxidants, including vitamins C and E, fern extract, and green tea

WHAT THEY DO: It's complicated, but stick with us: UV light generates free radicals in the skin (even with sunscreen), which injure the DNA of healthy cells. These can produce more damaged cells, which can result in wrinkles, discoloration, and possibly cancer years later. Antioxidants neutralize those free radicals and help repair cellular damage, which is why dermatologists talk about them non-stop. The problem is that there are so

Variety Packs

Companies that used to sell just moisturizers are now offering vitamins to help skin from the inside out. We asked doctors to size them up. —ELLEN MILLER



Olay Vitamins Total Effects Beautiful Skin & Wellness. "These have polyphenols in the form of green-tea extract, a powerful antioxidant with anti-cancer benefits. Extra ingredients, such as vitamins A and B, can improve the skin's appearance," says Amy B. Lewis, a dermatologist in New York City.



Santica Beauty Recipes Anti-Wrinkle Dietary Supplement. "This company has done some compelling studies showing that women who have taken this supplement saw a significant improvement in skin wrinkling. I plan on trying it myself," Lupo says.



N.V. Perricone M.D. Skin and Total Body Dietary Supplements. "Good for women over 40, because it addresses osteoporosis with calcium and magnesium, and heart health with vitamin E and lipoic acid. It also contains lots of anti-aging antioxidants," says dermatologist Mary P. Lupo.



Jan Marini C-Estamins. "There are some really good antioxidants in this multivitamin, including Coenzyme Q10, vitamins C and E, and alpha lipoic acid, but there are no studies in humans that show that ingesting hyaluronic acid will diminish the appearance of wrinkles," Lewis says.



Boscia Clear Complexion Therapy. "This could be useful for a woman who breaks out around her period, because the niacin and other vitamin B derivatives can calm acne flare-ups, while the coix seed and vitex extract help to reduce puffiness and bloating," Lewis says.



Murad Optimal Health & Beauty Dietary Supplement. "This is great for people with dehydrated skin. I took it while I was living in Colorado and saw an improvement in my dry skin in less than a week—probably because of the essential fatty acids such as fish and borage oils," Lupo says.

many antioxidants to choose from. "They can each act in a different way in terms of protecting the body and absorbing the negative impact of those free radicals," says David J. Leffell, a professor of dermatology at the Yale University School of Medicine.

THE PROOF: A few antioxidants show real potential. Vitamins C and E, when taken orally for three months, can reduce and protect against the damage caused by UV rays, according to a study published in *The Journal of Investigative Dermatology*. A supplement called Heliocare, which contains a fern extract, has a similar effect, according to a 2004 study published in the *Journal of American Academy of Dermatology*. Green tea may also protect skin. Scientists at the University of Alabama at Birmingham showed that when mice drank large quantities of green tea and were exposed to ultraviolet light, they developed 35

percent fewer skin cancers than mice that drank only water. "We expect the human response would be similar, but the magnitude of the effect would differ from person to person," says researcher Santosh K. Katiyar.

HOW TO BENEFIT: Many dermatologists say it's best to get antioxidants from foods, including fruits and vegetables, nuts, grains, and some meats, poultry, and fish, because these nutrients are easiest for the body to absorb. But others believe supplements can increase the benefits. Leslie Baumann, professor of dermatology at the University of Miami, takes antioxidant supplements twice a day. "I recommend vitamins C and E, Coenzyme Q10, alpha lipoic acid, lycopene, green tea, and Heliocare." As for amounts, right now, very little is known about exactly how much people need. "The question arises about how much is too much, internally," Leffell says. "The body naturally processes antioxidants in our food, but it's not clear how well it will cope with supplements. So use logic. If you eat a lot of junk food and you're not getting natural antioxidants from your diet, take supplements."

ACNE

THE INGREDIENT: Niacin (vitamin B derivative found in a variety of foods)

WHAT IT DOES: The links between acne and pizza, French fries, and chocolate (the essential nutrients of adolescents) are still being debated. And scientists believe that there's also a connection between zits and other foods, ones that seem to aggravate and inflame skin. Niacin is a suspected, though unstudied, powerhouse in fighting acne. Dermatologists believe the ingredient's anti-inflammatory qualities are the key to its skin-clearing abilities.

THE PROOF: Right now, mostly anecdotal. "The scientific testing hasn't been rigorous, but I have seen research in which acne sufferers were weaned off antibiotics by taking a niacin supplement," Lupo says.

HOW TO BENEFIT: A nonprescription capsule called Nycomed. "What I tell patients is, 'Look, give it a go; it can't hurt'—some people do have a positive response to it," Lupo says. For everyone else, dietary sources include beets, pork, turkey, chicken, veal, tuna, sunflower seeds, and peanuts. ♦

Water Weight

By now, even life forms on Mars have heard the advice to drink eight glasses of water a day—but dermatologists have always questioned the notion that doing so improves the skin. Recently, a small study suggested it may. German researchers prescribed .58 gallons (about nine eight-ounce glasses) of mineral water per day for four weeks to people who routinely drank relatively little water, and reported a significant increase in skin hydration and slight decrease in fluid retention. "We were able to demonstrate that drinking two liters of mineral water per day has an impact on skin, and that may be due to increased dermal fluid content," says Stefanie Williams of the University of Hamburg. Still, other experts see the findings as common sense. "Water internally hydrates the entire body and provides a healthier environment for cellular turnover and toxicity elimination," Lupo says. "So yes, increasing your intake should benefit skin too." As for whether your chugging will be noticeable in the mirror—the jury is still out.

The Bottom Line

Here's what experts advise for specific problems. (Always check with your doctor before starting to take these or any supplement regimen.)

THE PROBLEM	THE PILL	THE DOSAGE	THE RISKS
Dry skin	Fish oil (omega-3) and/or flaxseed oils	Two to three servings of oily fish per week, or fish- or flaxseed-oil capsules daily (experts have not agreed upon the amount needed)	None reported
Weak hair or brittle nails	Biotin	A dermatologist-supervised mega dose	None reported
Sun damage, wrinkles	Vitamins C and E, Heliocare (contains fern extract), green tea	Experts have not agreed upon optimal amounts of vitamin C and E; 240 mg. fern extract daily; several cups of green tea daily	None reported
Acne	Niacin (a B vitamin; doctors may advise patients take the supplement Nycomed)	14 mg. niacin daily, with a maximum of 35 mg.	Possible effects include nausea and liver damage