The Real Secret to Banishing Wrinkles

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Oftentimes patients ask me what they can do to help the “bat wings" that have developed on their upper arms. The arm muscles that were once tight and toned have become "flabby," and they joke that if a good strong wind comes along they might “fly away!” Along with this change in muscle tone comes a change in their skin and joints. The skin sags and has more wrinkles, and the joints become stiffer and achier. These changes are part of the aging process. But is there a way to slow this process and improve the tone of our muscles, reduce the wrinkles in our skin and restore suppleness to our joints? Fortunately, according to research, there is.

Collagen is a structural protein often referred to as the “glue” that helps hold the body together. Collagen helps the skin maintain its thickness and elasticity. It supports connective tissues like ligaments and tendons, helps hold the teeth in place and is important in maintaining lean muscles, as well as healthy hair, skin and nails. Collagen can also act as an anti-inflammatory for those with arthritis.

Our body produces plenty of collagen when we are young. As we age, collagen production declines leading to sagging skin, wrinkles and the breakdown of cartilage in our joints. This reduction in collagen production typically begins in our 40s and continues to decline through the years.

Besides the natural decline in collagen production, there are other factors that accelerate the depletion of collagen in the body and speed the aging process, including:

* **Smoking.** Tobacco smoke contains many chemicals that break down collagen and decrease new collagen formation. Studies have shown heavy smokers are almost five times more likely to have increased wrinkles than non-smokers because smoking produces an enzyme in the body that destroys collagen. This is one reason smokers tend to look older than their true age. Women who smoke are at an even greater risk than men for accelerated aging since women have much less collagen compared to men, which makes their skin age faster.
* **Sun Exposure.** While there are benefits to sun exposure, too much sun can lead to an increased rate of collagen breakdown. According to research at the University of Pennsylvania, sunlight is responsible for 90 percent of wrinkles and sagging skin. Sun damage is cumulative, and the negative changes to skin tone, skin texture and skin thickness may not be seen for many years. (The UV lights used in tanning beds also significantly damage collagen and the skin.) No more than 15 to 20 minutes of direct sunlight daily is recommended for healthy adults. After that, apply a non-toxic sunscreen and/or wear a hat and shirt with sleeves.
* **Sugar**. When we eat excessive amounts of sugar, it causes an increase in glycation. Glycation is where the sugar attaches to proteins and forms molecules called Advanced Glycation End Products (AGEs). It’s ironic these end products are called AGEs because that is exactly what they do…age you! These molecules weaken collagen, making it dry and brittle, and cause degeneration of the skin, muscles and joints. Osteoarthritis, once only common in the elderly, is now found in much younger people. Much of this increase can be attributed to a Standard American Diet loaded with sugar.
* **Excess Alcohol Consumption**. Alcohol basically converts into sugar in the body, so everything concerning the negative effects of sugar also applies to alcohol.

The good news is there are steps we can take to replenish natural collagen levels, improve the tone of muscles, reduce wrinkles and restore suppleness to our joints.

1. Eat a quality diet. Since collagen is a protein, consume high-quality protein such as free-range chicken and free-range eggs, grass-fed beef, and wild-caught, cold-water fish like salmon or shellfish.
2. Consume bone broth. Make sure the broth is made from grass-fed beef or free-range chickens free of antibiotics and hormones. If you purchase bone broth, the fewer ingredients on the label the better. The best bone broth is homemade. It is very simple to do and costs a lot less.
3. Eat foods containing nutrients that help support the formation of collagen. These nutrients include: vitamin C which is found in organic oranges, strawberries, peppers and broccoli; copper which is commonly found in shellfish and nuts; and vitamin A which can be found in carrots, sweet potatoes, dark leafy greens, winter squashes, lettuce, cantaloupe and bell peppers**.**
4. Take a supplement containing hydrolyzed collagen. A number of studies have found collagen supplementation to be beneficial, especially in helping reduce joint pain from osteoarthritis. There is a particular product containing hydrolyzed collagen we use with success in our office that has been found to reduce inflammation, stimulate connective tissue repair and increase joint mobility and function**.**

Many women reach for creams to help reduce wrinkles and improve skin firmness. These creams might claim to increase collagen levels, but the collagen molecules in them are too large to be absorbed through the skin and do not strengthen the skin. The health of our skin, muscles and joints comes from within. It is what we eat and drink that provides our bodies with the necessary nutrients to fight wrinkles, and reduce joint pain and stiffness. So, save your money on the cosmetics and spend it on what does help!