

decoding DARK SKIN

Uncovering myths about skin-care practices and learning what treatments and procedures work well for your skin tone.

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When it comes to skin care, those of us with dark skin face unique challenges both at home and at a spa or dermatologist's office.

We enlisted three top Canadian experts to discuss the do's and don'ts for dark skin, dispel common myths and inform you on how to find out what treatments are safe for your particular skin tone.

DARK SKIN FUNDAMENTALS

Before we delve deeper, we need to understand the fundamental characteristics of dark skin and how a skin's level of pigment renders it unique in terms of personal care and aesthetic practices. The skin, which is the largest organ in the human body, is made up of several layers composed of "melanocytes, or pigment cells, yet the amount of melanin (the pigment itself) will differ across skin types," says Dr. Jaggi Rao, MD, FRCPC a board certified dermatologist and clinical professor of medicine at the University of Alberta. This means that darker skin contains more melanin in the melanocytes and surrounding skin cells in comparison to fair skin.

The reason for this difference in pigmentation and melanocytes roots itself in our

ancestors' need to survive in their native environments, explains Holly Sherrard, Canadian education manager for Dermalogica Canada and The International Dermal Institute: "Anthropologists believe racial variations [in skin colour] developed because of natural selection, enabling early humans to adapt to the particular environment to which they migrated. For example, individuals of darkly pigmented brown skin most likely developed their skin colour to protect them from the burning ultraviolet (UV) light rays, which are stronger as you get closer to the equator. People living north of the equator developed pale or white skin to ensure absorption of UV rays, which promote vitamin D formation in the skin." Fast-forward centuries later to today and we see people of several different skin colours living in one climate because of multiculturalism and the inevitable modern-day migration of populations due to globalization.

DECONSTRUCTING FALSEHOODS

In order to uncover the best ways to treat and take care of dark skin, it's important to dispel some common myths that we have about dark skin.

myth 1

DARK SKIN DOESN'T NEED SUNSCREEN.

THE TRUTH: Although lighter-coloured skin has less melanin to protect against harmful UV light that results in precancers, skin cancers and premature aging, people with darker skin tones don't get a free pass when it comes to applying sunscreen. Darker skin is less likely to tan or burn because it has more melanin, which gives it protection from UV damage, "but it is not enough to protect from our powerful UV rays. Wear sunscreen to prevent burns, damage and the formation of free radicals at a cellular level," explains Sharon Edgley, clinical educator for Cutera. This does mean, however, that darker skin has more natural defences to protect itself from "the premature aging effects of UV light, such as freckles, sun spots, broken blood vessels, fine lines, precancers and cancers in comparison to individuals with lighter skin," says Dr. Rao. When spending time outdoors, always follow the guidelines of the Canadian Dermatology Association: Use SPF sunscreen of at least 30, and apply it 10 to 15 minutes before going outside. Reapply every two hours after the skin becomes wet or sweaty.

DARK *skin* CHEAT SHEET

According to Holly Sherrard, Canadian education manager for Dermalogica Canada and The International Dermal Institute, the six defining characteristics unique to "brown skin" are the following:

- ▶ MORE MELANIN, or brown skin pigment, resulting in a warmer skin shade.
- ▶ GREATER NATURAL PROTECTION from the sun and lower risk of skin cancer.
- ▶ FEWER VISIBLE SIGNS OF AGING, such as deep wrinkles, fine lines and sun spots.
- ▶ POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH PIGMENTATION, or uneven darkening or lightening of skin colour
- ▶ GREATER RISK OF KELOID (raised, often large scars) development.
- ▶ POTENTIAL PROBLEMS with hair growth and ingrown hairs.

myth 2

DARK SKIN DOESN'T NEED MOISTURIZER.

THE TRUTH: Every skin type requires moisturizer. This misnomer that dark skin doesn't need moisture developed from the fact that "dark skin typically produces more oil, allowing for a more intact barrier function," explains Sherrard. Yet dark skin still "needs water or moisture in the skin." According to Edgley, we apply moisturizers to maintain healthy functioning of the skin and balance, as well as feeding our skin the essential nutrients it expels throughout the day. The level of hydration and type of moisturizer you need should be determined by your skin's oil production, so oily skin suits lightweight, oil-free moisturizer, while dry skin needs an ultra-rich, creamy moisturizer.

myth 3

DARK SKIN DOESN'T EXPERIENCE REDNESS.

THE TRUTH: "Although dark skin may not appear to become red and irritated, all skin types have the potential to exhibit these signs and symptoms," explains Sherrard. Often a person with dark skin can't see the redness, but he or she can still feel the irritation (I attest to this personally!). Eradicate redness and irritation with the help of Dermalogica's Redness ReliefPrimer (\$62, spas), which soothes the skin with aloe and linseed extracts while camouflaging redness with its green tint. Each application creates a smooth-as-silk base to work with your makeup. As well, even though redness is not visible in everyday cases, dark skin will experience redness during and after laser procedures, microdermabrasion and chemical peels.

myth 4

ALL DARK SKIN IS THE SAME.

THE TRUTH: Naturally, all dark skin is not the same as the levels of melanin differ, making some skin appear as lighter shades of brown, darker brown and black skin. These skin tones fall under skin tones IV to

VI on the Fitzpatrick Scale. "There is a higher risk of complications to consider when working with darker skin [in a medical spa or doctor's office] when considering microdermabrasion, chemical peels or laser treatments," explains Edgley. In comparison to light skin, darker skin is more prone to tissue injury, inflammation, scarring and hyperpigmentation and develops thicker, raised scars called keloids.

myth 5

ALL SKIN AGES THE SAME.

THE TRUTH: "The aging process is determined by how a person takes care of his or her skin," says Sherrard. However, "the biological process by which we age is the same in all skin types. We stop producing collagen, lose volume, develop wrinkles and start to sag. The progression of these and many other factors will be different in each individual, based on health, environment, stress and lifestyle," explains Edgley. "Generally, skin types IV to VI don't show their age and look years younger than skin types I to III at the same age." This is because darker skin types have thicker skin and produce more moisture, so wrinkles and fine lines do not form at the same rate as a lighter skinned individual at the same age.

myth 6

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET A TREATMENT OR PROCEDURE DONE AT A MEDICAL SPA OR DOCTOR'S OFFICE IF YOU HAVE DARK SKIN.

THE TRUTH: Although clients with dark skin need to be more cautious when getting treatments done, there are many options available for skin rejuvenation that render great results without unwanted side effects. Edgley places the onus on the treatment provider: "Make sure the treatment provider is experienced at treating dark skin and explains all the risks and complications." Dr. Rao agrees: "Care must be taken to use minimal aggressiveness to prevent hyperpigmentation, blistering [which can occur up to 48 hours post-treatment] and scarring. This may mean using more conservative parameters and more frequent treatment sessions or, in some cases, using concomitant modalities [to reduce the intensity of one treatment form] to address a patient's problems." ☺

UNDERSTANDING *the* FITZPATRICK SCALE FOR *skin*

The Fitzpatrick Scale is a classification scheme for skin colour that is based on "the rate at which we absorb UV rays and includes six different skin types. The lighter you are, the higher risk you are for burning; the darker you are, the darker you will become. Your skin type will also determine what you can and can't have done at the medical spa," explains Edgley. "Fitzpatrick III to VI, which are darker tones of skin, tend to react more negatively than fairer-skinned individuals to procedures such as lasers and peels," says Dr. Rao. Below are some characteristic guidelines on how to determine your own skin type.

TYPE I: Pale white; blonde or red hair; blue eyes; freckles. Always burns, never tans.

TYPE II: White; fair; blonde or red hair; blue, green or hazel eyes. Usually burns, tans minimally

TYPE III: Cream white; fair with any hair or eye colour; quite common. Sometimes mild burn, tans uniformly

TYPE IV: Moderate brown; typical Mediterranean skin tone. Rarely burns, always tans well

TYPE V: Dark brown; Middle Eastern skin. Very rarely burns, tans very easily

TYPE VI: Deeply pigmented dark brown to black skin. Never burns, tans very easily

TREATMENT GUIDE FOR DARK SKIN

Looking to get a procedure done? Before you lie down on the table read over this chart. If you feel apprehensive about something after a consultation have the physician or practitioner do a test spot in a discreet area to get an idea of the treatment's results and impact on your skin type.

PROCEDURE	SAFE FOR DARK SKIN?
LASER HAIR REMOVAL	Make sure the laser being used is safe for dark skin tones. Nd: YAG 1064 and diode lasers are the gold standard in treating dark skin types.
INTENSE PULSATED LIGHT THERAPY (IPL)	IPL is not safe for dark skin, but other treatments, such as Fraxel, Clear and Brilliant or Cutera's Laser Genesis, rejuvenate and refresh skin by reducing pigmentation, scars and pores with minimal downtime.
FACIALS	Facials ensure healthy, beautiful skin, but be wary of deep exfoliation and extractions, as dark skin is delicate and produces pigmentation easily.
CHEMICAL PEELS	Generally considered unsafe for dark skin. Other modes of exfoliation work just as well without posing a risk.



PHOTOS: THINKSTOCK