The Skin of a Smoker
Can We Heal the Damage?
By Kimberly Moskowitz, MD

Most people can pick a smoker out of a crowd with their thickened leathery skin, pale and ashen color, and enlarged pores. They have “smokers lines” radiating from their mouth and deep crows feet around their eyes from years of squinting to protect them from the toxic fumes. Smoking damages nearly every organ in your body including our largest organ, skin. It is linked to at least 15 different cancers, and accounts for close to 30% of all cancer deaths. Smokers are also more than three times as likely to develop a dangerous form of skin cancer called squamous cell carcinoma. Given these statistics, it is astonishing that one out of every five Americans smoke. For every 10 years of smoking, your skin ages 14 years. As the typical smoker turns 38, they will look 46. When they are 48 years old, their skin will appear 60.

Why does a smoker’s skin age so quickly?
One cigarette has about 4,000 toxic chemicals including acetone (nail polish remover), Butane (lighter fluid), Naphthalene (moth repellant), Arsenic (a lethal rat poison), formaldehyde, cyanide, lead and mercury. Carbon monoxide in the smoke suffocates our cells by displacing oxygen from the blood. Nicotine, one of the most addictive substances known to mankind, is a potent vasoconstrictor, resulting in diminished blood flow to the skin. Together, these toxins poison the skin, causing vital proteins like collagen and elastin to weaken and collapse.

Studies show that smoking one cigarette depletes cells of oxygen for more than an hour. If you smoke a pack each day, your skin is not “breathing” for 20 hours.

Toxins in smoke cause degeneration of collagen and elastin, the main structural support proteins in our skin. Collagen gives our skin youthful elasticity and protects us from sagging and wrinkling. Smoking depletes these important architectural elements by breaking down vitamin C, a powerful antioxidant and the body’s main building block for collagen fibers. Smoking also generates harmful free-radicals. These unstable molecules behave like thieves, stealing ions from normal molecules in attempt to neutralize themselves. This process wreaks havoc on our cells, causing premature aging of the skin, cancer, and heart disease.

So what can you do if your skin has been ravaged by years of smoking? The most obvious but difficult step is that you must quit. Within hours, the cells in your body and skin will begin to repair themselves as oxygen and nutrients are properly delivered. Topical application of antioxidants such as Vitamin C (L-ascorbic acid), vitamin E, and alpha lipoic acid exert protective and reparative effects against free-radical damage caused by years of smoking. Daily use of Retin-A with a zinc oxide-containing sunscreen will slowly improve skin texture, soften fine lines, repair aging skin and even reverse some early skin cancers.

Dramatic and immediate results can be attained with non-ablative skin resurfacing using the Fraxel™ laser. With very little down time, Fraxel™ causes old damaged skin cells to be replaced by healthy new ones. A series of Fraxel treatments can quickly and easily erase a decade of abuse. Photodynamic (PDT) is another non-surgical miracle for quickly reversing advanced signs of aging skin. One to two treatments has been shown to eliminate pre-cancerous skin lesions, age-spots, early skin cancers, and dilated capillaries. Like Fraxel™, PDT dramatically softens lines around the mouth, crows’ feet, skin texture, and pore size. Putting down those cigarettes may be one of the most difficult challenges you ever face…. but your face is worth it!

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