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OCTOBER 2018

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SKINCARE NEWS

# CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SKIN

THE COLLAGEN CURE  
IS EVERYWHERE,  
BUT CAN SLURPING BONE  
BROTH—OR TAKING  
SUPPLEMENTS AND  
SPREADING ON CREAMS—  
GIVE YOU FIRMER SKIN?  
ALEKSANDRA CRAPANZANO  
INVESTIGATES



**N**ot for nothing did chicken soup earn the nickname “Grandma’s penicillin.” While it’s no substitute for antibiotics, it is one of the most nourishing, hydrating, and easily digested foods to consume when you’re recovering from a bad case of the sniffles. So much so, in fact, that nearly every culture makes, and has made for time immemorial, some version of chicken soup or, at least, broth. And while the exact medicinal properties of the elixir—made by simmering water, meat, bones, vegetables, and often herbs for several hours—remain the source of much debate, we do know that bone broth is particularly rich in collagen.

Yes, collagen. You’ve probably heard the word used singularly, but in fact collagen is a family of 28 (currently identified) proteins, many of which give structure to the skin, ligaments, and tendons of humans and animals. As we age, collagen degrades, causing skin to sag and wrinkle, evidence of inner wear and tear. Since bone broth has collagen, it’s easy to assume that drinking it is akin to getting a refill of that youthful bounce. And dozens of companies producing collagen supplements and bone broth have sprung up over the past few years, some built on this very premise. (A particularly successful one uses the phrase “broth, not Botox” on its website.) Could



it be, I wondered, that a bowl of soup a day keeps the dermatologist away?

This sounded far too good to be true, so I decided to investigate by calling my favorite dermatologist for the lowdown. If Bradley S. Bloom, from the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York, weren't so kind, I might have felt embarrassed asking if the collagen in chicken soup could replenish the dwindling supply holding my face in place. "If only it were so easy!" he told me. "The bad news is you have to make your own collagen. The chicken can't do that for you." Our bodies simply can't absorb proteins like collagen whole. Instead, they are broken down during digestion.

I can't say hearing this came as a total surprise, but it's hard to square it with the prevalence of collagen products. Walk into nearly any health store or beauty emporium and you will see tubs of powdered collagen, gummies, supplements, and tonics lining the shelves. Is it just another fad with little scientific evidence to justify opening our wallets? "Absolutely," Dr. David L. Katz, author of the forthcoming *The Truth About Food*, was quick to answer. "It's all marketing." I asked if the protein in these products might at least be beneficial. "Unless you have an illness that makes you protein deficient, even a well-balanced vegan diet provides all the necessary protein your body needs to produce collagen," he explained. That may be why so few academics have seen the need to study how oral collagen supplements affect human skin. Most of the studies to date have been funded by makers of collagen supplements and are not the sort of controlled, peer-reviewed studies that doctors take seriously. What the research does support, according to Katz: "Stick with a plant-rich diet of vegetables, fruits, seeds, whole grains, beans, lentils, and water, when thirsty. Study after study shows that people who follow this kind of diet have the healthiest skin."

Howard Murad, a Los Angeles dermatologist and the founder of the eponymous skincare line, echoed Katz: "The best way to support your skin is to eat foods that contain the nutrients your skin needs."

"Such as nutritious, collagen-rich chicken soup?" I asked, not yet willing to throw in the towel. "Yes and no," said Murad. "Our bodies have specialized cells called fibroblasts that help produce collagen, and they need the right building blocks, in the form of antioxidants, trace minerals, B vitamins, and amino acids, to perform. Chicken soup happens to be very rich in amino acids," Murad offered. In fact, he designed his Youth Builder Dietary Supplement with precisely this purpose in mind. Still, he prefers to focus on minimizing collagen loss by avoiding sun exposure and reducing stress. "Modern living,

digital dependency, and cultural expectations lead us to a sedentary lifestyle and a constant feeling that we need to be more perfect. The results on skin are dramatic. Under stress, you make less collagen." My own stress levels rose as I listened. "I call this anxiety syndrome," he added. I let out a weak, anxious laugh.

While a stress-free existence sounds wonderful, it also sounds like a dream, and an improbable one at that. I returned to Bloom. "Let's get back to the good news," he said, sensing my discouragement. "Laser resurfacing, intradermal injections of hyaluronic acids"—such as the cosmetic fillers Juvéderm and Restylane—"and topical application of retinol have been clinically proven to stimulate collagen production." Plus, he added, fibroblasts are constantly making new collagen, no matter your age.

Haideh Hirmand, a Manhattan plastic surgeon, also noted the impact of hyaluronic acid: "There's some evidence that applying topical hyaluronic acid creates an environment conducive to collagen production. And there's quite strong evidence that injecting it creates a stimulatory environment that activates collagen production." Treatments such as microneedling with a hyaluronic-acid serum can also stimulate fibroblasts. "The results I see doing this in my practice are very impressive, particularly after several treatments." Hirmand herself applies a topical hyaluronic-acid serum every day because it helps seal in moisture, which can optimize fibroblast activity.

Treatments and products that claim to "stimulate" and "optimize" collagen production may have their benefits, but wouldn't it be easier to smooth on a lotion that replenishes the actual collagen protein, molecule for molecule? On a recent trip through Sephora, I noticed several skin creams touting the ingredient. "Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that," said New York City dermatologist Dennis Gross. "Collagen does not penetrate skin. If it did, you would be able to slap on a cream and instantly have thicker skin." That's not to say these products don't have benefits; they may simply contain other ingredients that nudge sluggish fibroblasts into action. Gross's advice? "Look for ingredients like vitamin C and peptides that directly affect the fibroblast cell, connecting with its receptors and instructing it to speed up the production of collagen. Think of it as telling the cell to step on the gas."

I sensed that my quest to find collagen, and firmer skin, in something as wholesome (and effortless) as chicken soup was coming to an end, but I had one more stop: the Manhattan office of Amy Wechsler, who is not only a dermatologist but also a psychiatrist. I sighed and told her I felt defeated. Moreover, I was angry,

**Stand Firm**  
THESE INGREDIENTS ARE THE KEYS TO COLLAGEN PRODUCTION, EXPERTS SAY



**VITAMIN C**  
VICHY Liftactiv  
Vitamin C  
Brightening Skin  
Corrector, \$29.

**RETINOL**  
ELIZABETH  
ARDEN Retinol  
Ceramide Capsules  
Line Erasing Night  
Serum, \$84 for 60.



**HYALURONIC ACID**  
L'ORÉAL PARIS  
Revitalift Volume  
Filler Re-Volumizing  
Daily Moisturizer, \$25.



**PEPTIDES**  
JUICE BEAUTY  
Signal Peptides  
Firming Eye  
Balm, \$80.

if not exactly surprised, that companies make vaguely worded claims that may pass legal muster but lead us to believe in miracles that can't be scientifically substantiated. "We, the consumers, deserve better!" I said, on the verge of a rant.

"Yes, we absolutely do," she answered. On a positive note, the information I'd acquired was, in fact, helpful. Less stress, a well-balanced diet, ingredients like peptides and vitamin C—these were the tried-and-true basics. It couldn't get much more wholesome than that. "But it can," she jumped in. "Sleep!" I gave her a skeptical look.

"We make the most collagen while we sleep," she explained. At rest, levels of the stress hormone cortisol decrease, while growth-hormone and beta-endorphin levels rise, resulting in cell regeneration. "The body is in a constant state of damage and repair. When you're young, the repair is great; when you're older, less so," she continued. "But we can push for more repair by getting enough sleep; it's indispensable to collagen production. I want people to understand this," she added with emphatic urgency. "Sleep is a necessity, not a luxury."

Her directive was all the impetus I needed to drift off that night into a dreamy state of repair, regeneration, and rejuvenation. And what helped me fall so easily into a deep beauty sleep in the first chill of autumn air? A comforting bowl of piping-hot chicken soup. **mc**