

SMOG & THE CITY

Living in Hong Kong can get under your skin... literally. **Rachel Read** learns all about the effects of pollution on our complexions, and what we can do to limit the damage.

Given the increasing number of days we can barely see our famous harbour, it's hardly surprising that the smog can do some serious damage to your skin. "Toxins in the air can lead to premature aging in the skin, especially in exposed areas such as the face, neck, décolleté and hands, whilst the free radicals in air pollution deplete oxygen in skin cells and decrease collagen production leading to fine lines, wrinkles and rough, dry skin," says



Dr. Winnie Mui of Dr. Lauren Bramley & Partners (pictured, left). "Smog, dirt and dust can clog pores, leading to acne and dull, inflamed skin, while long-term exposure to air pollution can cause skin allergies and eczema."

Although the difficulties in isolating the effects of air pollution from other factors that lead to skin damage mean there are few studies into pollution's effect on the skin, a 2015 study by cosmetics giant L'Oréal is revealing. Decades of research comparing the skin condition of Mexican and Chinese city inhabitants with their rural counterparts found that the city

dwellers suffered more from dry, oversensitive and oily skin, with a lack of vitamin E and sebum - effects believed to be caused by increased exposure to air pollution.

And let's not ignore the anecdotal evidence from skincare professionals. Shoshana Weinberg, senior spa director at The Four Seasons Asia Pacific, has seen her fair share of pollution-caused skin problems. "Pollution affects many places in the world, not just Hong Kong, so we are seeing an increase of dryness and skin allergies in spas everywhere."

Cause & Effect

There are myriad elements that contribute to air pollution, meaning there are equally as many elements that can cause damage to your skin. Dr. Winnie Mui breaks it down as:

PARTICLES

Matter of various sizes that damage the skin via oxidative stress on collagen, weakening the skin's structure and thickness.

GASES

These include ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide. Ozone reacts with UV to generate carcinogens, breaking down proteins, destroying skin lipids like vitamin E and decreasing the skin's overall skin health (which can ultimately lead to skin cancer).

CHEMICALS

The chemicals found in cleaning products and building materials can cause skin aging, increase melanin (causing "age spots") and trigger skin allergies.

HEAVY METALS

These can cause halogen acne, chemical pigmentation and skin cancer.

Prevention 101

It's not all doom and gloom though; there are several steps we can take to combat the damaging effects of pollution. Let's talk bigger picture first. "The basics of good health are regular exercise, rest and a healthy diet with adequate hydration," explains Mui. "When you are healthy, so is your skin."

Unsurprisingly, skincare is hugely important. "Daily cleansing is essential," adds Mui. "Facials help remove superficial dirt and oils with exfoliants, and manual removal of blocked pores helps clear whiteheads and blackheads. Microdermabrasion sloughs off the top layer of dead skin cells, whilst deeper cleansing can be achieved with chemical peels such as salicylic acid."

Angela Wong started her business **Little Things In Life HK** (www.ltilhk.com), an e-store dedicated to selling organic skincare catered towards sensitive skin, precisely to counteract the pollution-caused skin complaints she was experiencing in Hong Kong after years in less-polluted Singapore.

Wong recommends looking out for products featuring antioxidants, which reduce inflammation, protect against UV exposure (especially when used together with sunblock), and help fight skin pigmentation and wrinkles. Popular antioxidants include vitamin C and E, coenzyme Q10 and beta carotene, alongside botanicals like green tea, pomegranate, coffee, berries and cold-pressed coconut oil. Anti-inflammatory ingredients like argan oil are also great for soothing irritated skin or rashes.

Hydrating products are essential. Mui advises using serums, which are usually water-based and can be easily absorbed by the skin without clogging pores, leaving denser creams for the evening. Wong believes that weekly exfoliation is a vital part of the process too: "It's highly effective for deep cleansing, getting you instantly smoother, brighter skin and allowing your facial products to absorb better."

And finally, always wear sunscreen. Choose a minimum of SPF30 with a physical block like zinc or titanium dioxide that's re-applied regularly, advises Mui. This, combined with moisturiser and foundation, forms a barrier to trap nanoparticles, giving your skin its best fighting chance against Hong Kong's smoggy air.