

# Treating common skin conditions

Skin treatments are big business, from rejuvenation services at the spa to over-the-counter miracle creams to prescription medications. The public is obsessed with looking its best. And it's no wonder: The skin is the largest organ of the body. It covers your entire frame, keeping your internal organs protected; regulates the amount of moisture entering and leaving the body; and helps to prevent infection. Since your skin covers your entire body, its colour, clarity and texture are often the first thing a person notices upon meeting you. As such, when something mars the skin, like a wrinkle, a scar or acne, you may feel self-conscious and eager to seek out a fast and effective remedy to treat the problem.

There are many ailments and conditions that can affect the skin. Here's a look at just a few of them and the steps you can take to help reverse the damage.

## Stretch Marks

Stretch marks, medically known as striae gravidarum, are irregular lines caused by the over-stretching of the skin. Stretch marks are commonly associated with pregnancy, where the rapid growth of the uterus forces the skin of the abdomen and hips to stretch and accommodate the increased size. However, stretch marks can occur any time there is rapid weight gain or loss. Teenagers going through puberty may experience stretch marks on the hips, breasts or shoulders. Someone who was overweight and shed the pounds may find stretch marks on his or her arms and legs, in addition to other places. Stretch marks start out as pink, reddish brown or dark brown streaks, depending upon your skin colour. The pigmentation in the stretch marks gradually fades, and the "striae" begin to look like glistening silvery lines.

Although stretch marks occur from excessive stretching, they aren't caused directly by the stretching itself. The underlying factor is a loss of collagen and elastin in the skin. As such, the under layers of the skin actually tear and then the stretch marks form when the body tries to repair itself.

There are many products that claim to prevent stretch marks or return your skin to its original appearance. However, these are likely to be false claims. You can reduce the probability of getting stretch marks yet, even still, genetics and your predisposition to the condition may triumph over any preventative measures. Some things to try include rubbing your skin with cocoa butter, Vitamin E and mineral oil, or another moisturizing product. In addition, be sure to always stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water. This will help the skin stay supple and be able to repair itself more readily.

## Acne

According to the National Institutes of Health, nearly 17 million people in the

United States have acne, making it the most common skin disease. While acne is not a serious health threat, it has the potential to be disfiguring and very upsetting to sufferers.

Acne is a disorder of the sebaceous glands connected to a canal, called a follicle, that contains a fine hair. These follicles are commonly found on the face, upper back, and chest. The sebaceous glands make an oily substance called sebum that empties onto the skin's surface through the opening of the follicle, called a pore. However, when the sebum drains improperly, it can cause a backup in the pores, leading to infection, inflammation, and acne. Common misconceptions about acne are that it is caused by dirt or by eating greasy foods or chocolate. Such factors do not contribute to the condition. Rather, it is often the result of a hormonal change during puberty, or when there is an abundant production of sebum on the skin.

People with acne have a variety of lesions, some of which are known as comedos - plugged hair follicles. If the plugged follicle stays below the skin, it forms a white bump or whitehead. If the comedo reaches the skin's surface, it opens, forming a black bump known as a blackhead.

Acne treatment includes a process of healing existing lesions, stopping new lesions from forming, and preventing the

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skin from scarring. Prescription medications that are taken orally or applied topically may be prescribed. Blackheads and whiteheads often can be treated by over-the-counter products that contain benzoyl peroxide, resorcinol, salicylic acid, or sulfur. Benzoyl peroxide reduces oil production, while resorcinol, salicylic acid, and sulfur help slough off dead skin cells to break down the blackheads or whiteheads. Depending upon the severity of the acne, more aggressive treatments such as laser resurfacing may be recommended by a dermatologist.

office microdermabrasion or laser treatments to slough off the outer layers of skin to reduce a scar.

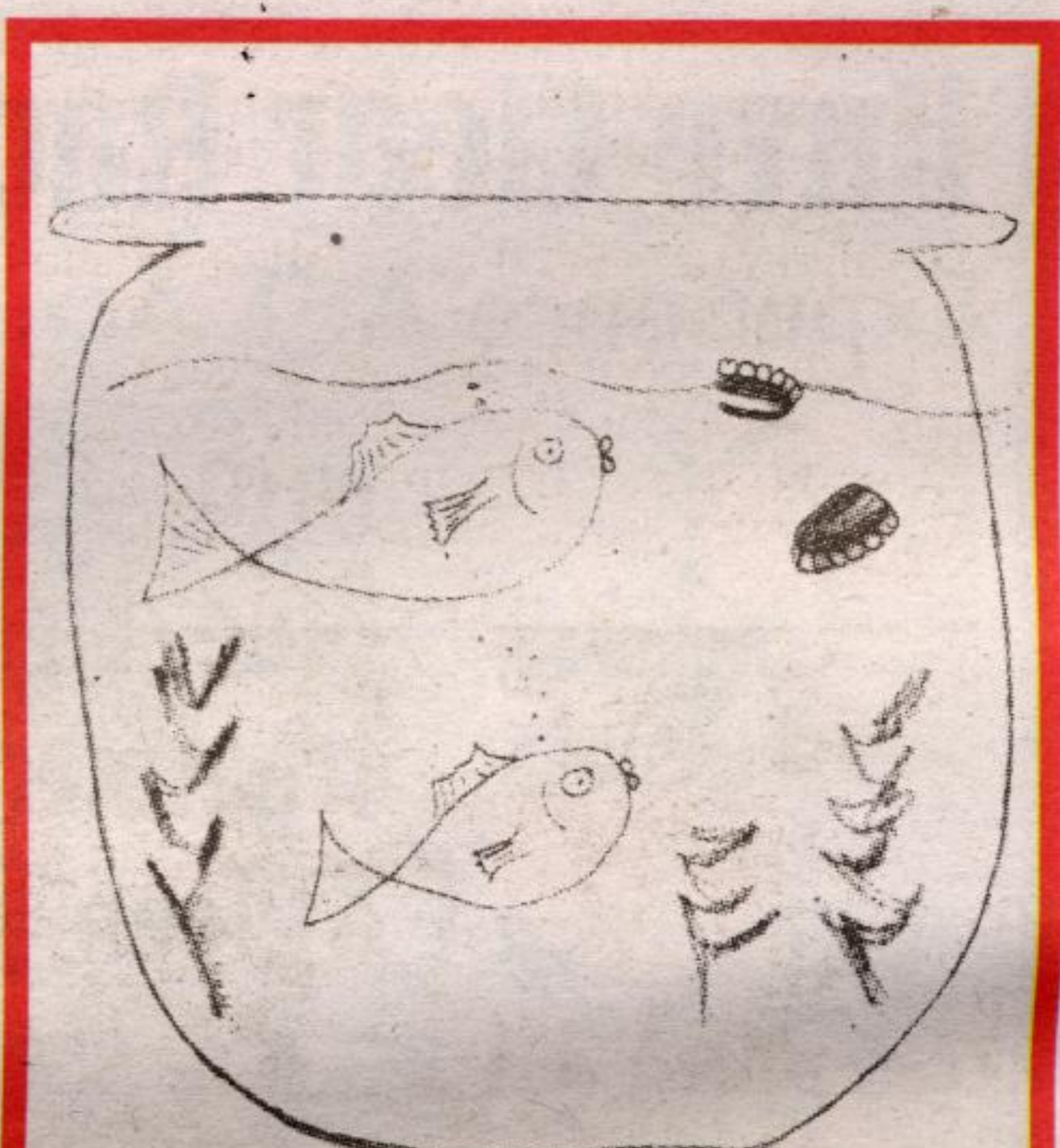
Before you undergo any treatment for any type of skin condition, discuss the potential benefits and hazards with a reputable specialist and see if its covered by your health insurance.

You don't want to cause unnecessary or further damage to your skin.

## Scars

Scars can occur from many types of injury to the skin, like a scrape or cut, or during surgery. They can also result when skin that has acne, the chickenpox or eczema is scratched and then gets infected. After a skin injury, the body's priority is to make a rapid and strong repair - a big plus for our primitive ancestors who lived in dirty and dangerous conditions. Scars may look unattractive, but they are an efficient way for the body to heal. To regenerate tissue exactly as it was before the injury would be time-consuming.

There are many types of scars, and there are equally as many types of treatments. Depending upon the severity of the scar and its noticeability, you may just want to leave it alone. Scars usually reduce in visibility after two or three years. However, some scars, like keloids, will actually grow bigger and bigger. Treatments for scars may include massaging the skin with oils or creams to plump up the skin and reduce visibility. Larger scars may be worked on by cosmetic surgeons to be repaired into a less noticeable scar. Dermatologists may also perform in-



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