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The skin is the largest organ of the body, yet, most of us don't do enough to maintain the skin's health. The skin provides a protective barrier keeping moisture, dirt, and germs from entering the body, helps regulate body temperature, eliminates waste in the form of sweat, and manufactures hormones and vitamins, such as vitamin D, when it is exposed to the sun. The skin is also a sense organ, giving us information about pain, pleasure, temperature and pressure.

There are three layers of the skin: the outer layer or, epidermis, the second layer, or dermis, and beneath the dermis is a layer of fatty tissue. The epidermis contains pigment which shields us from the sun's rays and keratin which keeps the skin durable. The cells in this layer are continuously being worn away and replaced. The dermis contains blood vessels, nerve ending, hair follicles, sweat glands and oil glands. The fatty tissue layer gives support to the nerve endings and sweat glands. As you can see, it's more complicated than it looks.

The skin is probably the first organ to show signs of ageing. As we age, the skin becomes thinner, drier and more prone to damage. We're often concerned because of how it affects our appearance. More importantly, we should be concerned about preserving the protection the skin affords.

There are a few steps you can take to maintain healthy skin, especially during the harsh winter months.

- ❑ Apply sunscreen to exposed skin (even during the winter), to protect skin from the sun's damaging rays.
- ❑ Apply moisturizer after showering, while the skin is still damp, especially, to elbows, knees, feet and hands.
- ❑ Drink plenty of water and other fluids to keep skin cells hydrated and plump.
- ❑ Use non-alcohol based shaving products and soaps that are moisturizing.
- ❑ Avoid sleeping with an electric blanket. The heat is drying. Instead, warm up the bed and turn off the blanket once you're under the covers.
- ❑ Use a humidifier. Heating your home makes the air dry, as well as warm.
- ❑ Wear gloves or mittens when outdoors in the cold weather.
- ❑ Inspect your skin for breaks, cuts or scrapes. Even a tiny break increases susceptibility to infection.
- ❑ Observe for changes in moles or freckles.
- ❑ Report changes and problems to your doctor immediately.
- ❑ As with maintaining the health of any body organ, eat nutritious food and get plenty of rest. Funny how the same advice always applies.

Take care and have a happy new year!