

How the Skin Works

Essential to your health, beauty, and well-being, your skin is an important part of who you are. There are many myths and much misinformation about your skin and its care. *Reader's Digest Guide to Skin Care* sets the record straight, starting with the basics. This chapter explains the functions and structure of the skin, and helps you understand the different types of skin specialists.



The physiological functions of the skin

You may often take your skin for granted and not realize all of the vital functions it performs. No one would deny that the heart is an organ essential to keeping us alive. Just like the heart, the skin is an organ crucial to your body's survival. The most important role that the skin plays is to protect you from the harsh and dangerous environment: everything from heat, humidity, and cold to chemicals, ultraviolet radiation, and microorganisms.

Your skin is a barrier

The skin is a waterproof barrier that seals the body from losses of fluid that could lead to dehydration and death. It resists invasion by various types of microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi, and viruses that cause infections and serious illness. The skin also blocks many chemicals and allergens from entering the body. It filters out the burning rays of the sun and protects our cells from cancer-causing radiation. It acts as a shock-absorber, cushioning internal organs from damage.

Keeping the skin healthy is very important given its wide range of critical activities. There are many ways that you can keep your skin's barrier function intact. Take the time to apply moisturizer when your skin is dry. Avoid things that disrupt the skin like harsh scrubs and vigorous scratching. And seek treatment for skin diseases promptly. With these steps, the skin will better protect you from the outside world.

Your skin is a thermostat

Whether you are lying on the beach in Rio de Janeiro or playing ice hockey in Anchorage, your body temperature remains constant. That is largely because your skin acts to cool the body down when it gets too hot and helps to warm the body when it gets too cold in order to maintain a temperature of approximately 98.6°F (37.0°C). So, your skin works like your home's

MOISTURIZE

Moisturizers help the epidermis stay soft and smooth by increasing or maintaining its water content.

They also help to maintain the skin's barrier function by preventing the cracks that are so common in dry, flaky skin.

For best results, apply moisturizer immediately after cleansing, while the skin is still damp.



Skin Myth

True or False?

The skin is the body's largest organ.

True

The skin is both the largest and the heaviest organ. The liver is the second largest and heaviest organ.