

Anti-Aging Strategies: Combat Free Radicals

In the anti-aging wars, the enemy combatant is the free radical. In the body, a free radical is an oxygen molecule that is missing an electron and steals one from a nearby cell. Although free radicals serve a beneficial purpose - such as killing bacteria - their sneaky way of robbing electrons can result in cell damage, which manifests as the signs of aging. While your body has mechanisms to reduce and repair damage by free radicals, you can help it along by avoiding the environmental causes of free radical production and by taking measures to increase your intake of antioxidants, which are the best defense against free radicals. Both of these anti-aging strategies will keep you looking younger for longer.

Environmental Hazards Environmental elements, such as UV radiation, alcohol, and food preparation, create free radicals that can outmatch your body's ability to neutralize them.

UV Radiation: Exposure to the ultraviolet (UV) radiation in sunlight is the biggest culprit in the premature aging of the skin; everything from wrinkling to dryness to easy bruising can be largely attributed to exposure to UVA and UVB radiation. Free radicals break down the skin's collagen, which is key to keeping skin soft and supple. Avoid sun exposure between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., particularly during the summer, when UV rays are strongest. If you must be outdoors, apply a UV-protective sunblock to any exposed areas of skin.

Alcohol: Although red wine has been touted as a source of antioxidants, it's unclear whether its benefits outweigh the free radical byproducts of two toxic compounds that alcohol produces. If you're going to drink alcohol, do so in moderation, and counteract its effects by eating foods rich in antioxidants.

Food Preparation: When certain foods are cooked at high temperatures, the fat they contain breaks down and produces free radicals. The process of commercially roasting nuts, for example, can break down heat-sensitive oils and result in free radical production. Most common, though, are the free radicals produced by grilling meat. But before you pack away your grill, you should know that you can minimize free radical production by slow cooking the meat, or, according to a recent study, sprinkle rosemary on meat before grilling it. The antioxidant properties of rosemary help to counteract the free radicals that form during the high-temperature cooking process.

Antioxidant Action By upping your intake of antioxidants, you can arm your body with more weaponry to combat free radicals. Naturally occurring in many foods, or taken as supplements, powerful antioxidants include:

Vitamin C: Because vitamin C is water-soluble, any excess gets flushed out of your body. So it's doubly important to make sure you get enough vitamin C each day. This vitamin is found in citrus fruits, broccoli, green leafy vegetables, many berries, raw cabbage, and asparagus.

Vitamin E: Vitamin E is fat-soluble, so it can be stored in your body's fat reserves. It has powerful anti-aging properties, and can be taken by supplement, or by eating fortified breakfast cereals, nuts, seeds, wheat germ, whole grains, leafy green vegetables, vegetable oil, and fish oil.

Beta-carotene: Just as beta-carotene protects fruits and vegetables from sun damage, it can do the same for you. Source of beta-carotene include carrots, broccoli, squash, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, peaches, and apricots.

Selenium: Selenium is a mineral that, taken in large doses, can be toxic. It does have strong antioxidant properties, though, and can be found in fish, red meat, grains, eggs, chicken, and garlic.

About the Author

Membership of the Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals. vitamins and minerals because large numbers of people consume vitamin.

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