QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON AGING SKIN

WHAT IS PHOTODAMAGE AND HOW CAN IT BE PREVENTED?
"Photodamage" is a term that encompasses all harmful interactions between sun and skin, both acute and chronic. Virtually everyone is acquainted with the red, swollen, stinging experience of sunburn. Yet, many are unaware that accumulated sun exposure may lead to a wide variety of delayed effects, such as skin cancers, scaly pre-cancers (actinic keratoses) and other effects, like facial wrinkling, which we commonly assume are due to aging. Although the word "photo" simply means light, most skin researchers believe the effects seen with photodamage are caused by solar-generated long and short wave ultraviolet light (also know as UVA and UVB).

The prevention of photodamage is simple. First, avoid sun exposure during the peak hours of 10 am and 3 pm. Second, wear long sleeved clothing and broad brimmed hats. Finally, since peak sun exposure may be unavoidable and because loosely woven fabrics may allow up to 50% penetration of ultraviolet light, apply a broad spectrum sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB rays, such as SolBar.

Because 80% of a lifetime Sun exposure may be accumulated before the age of 20, the most effective prevention of photodamage is regular use of sunscreen by children and teens. Fortunately, it's never too late to start a regimen of protection., A dramatic improvement can be seen in the severely photodamaged skin of older patients who use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 every day.

IS NORMAL AGING OF THE SKIN DIFFERENT THAN PHOTOAGING?
Yes, and this has been an area of fascinating research in the last decade. Although skin does undergo some alterations with the passage of time, such as thinning, dryness and laxity, these aging changes are very mild in sun-protected skin. In contrast, sun exposed skin undergoes both photoaging and intrinsic aging, resulting in the more dramatic finding we typically associate with coming of age: wrinkles, laxity, mottling of pigmentation scaly-ness or dryness and accentuation of small blood vessels. A simple way to illustrate this is to compare the skin on the back of the hand or the face with sun-protected skin such as the breast of abdomen.

WHAT CAUSES LIVER SPOTS?
"Liver Spots" are large flat or scaly brown spots that develop o the backs of the hands. They are so named because they have a liver-like color, not because they result from liver disorder. Most liver spots are simply large, sun-induced freckles. The only way to avoid them is to use sun protection early in life. These spots are of little medical consequence. They are one of a large group of benign skin growths patients acquire with age an sun exposure. A common brown, scaly growth known as keratosis may give the appearance of a liver spot when it arises in its flat form on the back of the hands. The thicker, dark brown, scaly, "stuck-on" looking keratosis is often found on the torso of older adults.

WHY DOES MY SKIN SEEM TO GET DRIER AS I GET OLDER?
Once again the key to this question may lie in the difference between sun-exposed and sun-protected skin. Sun-protected skin in older patients is only slightly drier than that in younger patients Chronically sun-exposed skin cannot maintain itself as well as sun-protected skin. This dryness should be controllable with the regular use of effective moisturizing creams and lotions.

HOW DO YOU KEEP THE SKIN ON THE SOLES OF THE FEET SOFT AS YOU AGE?
This is a common complaint of older patients A hot topic of research in the treatment of dry skin has been the effect of creams containing. the alpha hydroxy acids. These may not only moisturize the skin but cause it to grow in a more normal and less scaly fashion.