Damage Control

Say goodbye to summer — and to the sun’s lingering harmful effects
As summer is left behind and that sun-kissed glow begins to fade, all the damage your skin incurred over those outdoor months becomes visible. Troublesome areas include sun spots, freckles and other dark mottled patches (oh my!). As much as you’d like to run out to the nearest tanning bed (or hop a plane for a sunny isle) to cover up those imperfections with a continued bronze hue — stop! Don’t continue to damage your skin. It’s time to get skin smart.

THE SUN, YOUR SKIN
“Sun damage is a weathering of the skin manifested in wrinkles, pigmentation, sun spots/age spots/liver spots, abnormal production of melanin from the sun, thickening and wrinkling of the skin and generalized pigmentary variation,” says Joe Niamtu, D.M.D., a board-certified maxillofacial surgeon in Richmond, Va., with a practice limited to cosmetic facial surgery.

There’s no doubt about it: The sun can cause lots of damage, even to those of us who make every effort to protect it.

“Skin in the summer is more prone to damage because people are outdoors more,” says Cheryl Burgess, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist in Washington.

And even though we generally know what we’re supposed to do to protect our skin, “Not everybody does it,” Dr. Niamtu says. “They don’t apply enough (sunscreen), or often enough. They sweat it off or wash it off.”

SKIN SERIOUS
On the serious side of post-summer skin is the issue of skin cancer.

“It’s the first thing we look for after the summer,” Dr. Burgess says. “We run our hands over the skin and feel for precancerous areas, especially for people who work outdoors or are on vacation in a sunny place all summer.”

The best time of the year for identifying suspect skin lesions is in the fall, when the skin is no longer tanned.

“Is it a freckle, a mole or benign keratosis? It’s harder to identify when the person is tanned,” Dr. Burgess says.

On the issue of skin protection, we’ve been getting some mixed messages about sun exposure and vitamin D deficiencies, according to Dr. Burgess. “This is the biggest issue we’ve found in the U.S. For the past 25 years we’ve said, ‘Protect,’ but today we’ve found that we’re vitamin D-deficient as a result,” she says.

The American Academy of Dermatology recommends that you protect your skin with sun protection factor (SPF) 30, which blocks 97 percent of dangerous UV radiation, according to Dr. Burgess. But, “An SPF 15 is 93 percent blocking, only a 4 percent difference. So if a person is more deficient in vitamin D, I recommend an SPF 15. If they’re fine and taking vitamin D supplements, have them use a 30,” she says.

SKIN FIXES
Protecting the skin properly is such a big job, it’s almost not worth going outside, Dr. Niamtu says. But since we do, it’s good to know that some sun damage can be reversed.

Today, there are more options than ever before for treating those cosmetic skin issues, according to Dr. Niamtu.

“First and foremost, your best bet is medically based skincare: sun protection, sun avoidance,” he says. “Simply using the ‘triple crown’ — sunscreen, Retin A and a bleaching cream — go a long way in preventing and repairing the skin.”

Topical hydroquinone 4 percent, one such bleaching cream, is a reliable option. “Creams aren’t magic, but they can really go a long way. In my years of cosmetic practice, I didn’t have a patient who didn’t notice a difference,” Dr. Niamtu says.

Another nonsurgical option is the chemical peel, which comes in a variety of strengths (light, medium and deep).
“Chemical peels are a tried-and-true and safe means of eliminating fine lines/wrinkles, tightening skin and reducing pigment,” Dr. Niamtu says. “You can have a series of light peels every few weeks for a cumulative improvement with no downtime, or a deep peel to remove years of sun damage with a recovery of seven or eight days.”

Going high-tech, there are also laser treatment options, ranging from the lighter fractionated technology, which damages less skin and requires less downtime, to the more aggressive, traditional CO₂ laser, which removes the entire surface area of the skin and requires significant (two weeks, on average) downtime.

In terms of results, you get what you pay (in time) for, Dr. Niamtu says. You can have multiple less-invasive procedures or a one-time deal that gets you the same results.

“Well the math,” Dr. Niamtu says. “A three-day recovery three or four times or a two-week recovery just once. Like with any procedure, the less invasive it is, the less improvement you’ll get.”

Light is yet another option for repairing summer damage. Intense pulsed light, or IPL, has the benefit of going after both brown and red — those telltale post-summer brown spots and unsightly reddish spider veins. Add to that the potential for skin rejuvenation, and IPL is an attractive option for some. Typically it takes three to five treatments to get a noticeable result.

Dr. Niamtu says that because 99 percent of all resurfacing is uncomfortable, he usually sedates his patients when performing these skin treatments.

As for cost, it can range from as little as $200 to several thousand dollars, depending on the procedure and necessary aftercare. More specifically, while a light peel might cost $125, a more aggressive laser procedure could cost $3,500.

“The older the patient, the greater the damage, the more comprehensive the protocol,” Dr. Niamtu says.

The bottom line? The right precautions, regular screenings and corrective maintenance will keep your skin looking beautiful.