



Substance Abuse and Appearance

Does drinking heavily, using drugs, and/or smoking for years negatively affect a person's appearance?

Everyone knows that long-term alcohol use damages liver cells that detoxify the body—which results in premature aging of the skin. And now, new research has shown that alcohol abuse causes aging at an even more widespread cellular level.

The study, led by Dr. Naruhisa Yamaki at the Kobe University Graduate School of Medicine in Japan, studied 134 alcoholics between the ages of 41 and 85, and compared them to a control group of people in the same age group who were not alcoholics. DNA samples of both groups showed that the alcoholics had shortened cell telomere lengths, which proved that heavy drinking causes biological aging at a cellular level.

This new study contradicts previous research promoted by the alcohol industry that claimed moderate drinking might reduce the risk of age-related conditions like diabetes and dementia.

In another study, Danish scientists examined a database of health information involving more than 10,000 people. The participants in the study provided information about their smoking and drinking over a period of almost 30 years. The researchers looked at commonly known signs of aging—like the formation of a grey ring around the cornea of the eye, and earlobe creases.

The study found that excessive drinking by females was linked to a more

than 30% higher likelihood of having the age-related grey rings compared to women who drank fewer than seven drinks a week.

Men's risk of earlobe creases (indicating aging) was up to 36% higher among heavy drinkers than among light to moderate drinkers. (According to U.S. Government Dietary Guidelines, a moderate drinking level is up to one drink a day for women and up to two drinks a day for men. A drink is either 5 fluid ounces of wine, 12 fluid ounces of beer, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled liquor.)

Heavy smokers were also more likely to develop the age-related eye rings and earlobe creases compared to non-smokers.

In addition to accelerated cellular aging, alcohol abuse and long-term tobacco use also cause premature aging through: depletion of Vitamin A, resulting in premature wrinkles; a loss of collagen and face fullness; dehydration that makes skin dry and wrinkly; broken capillaries that cause redness and blotchiness; weight gain in the midsection and the jowls; and sleep disruption that deprives the body of deep, restorative sleep needed to stay young and healthy.

Illicit Drug Use and Your Looks

The use of "street" drugs can also change physical appearance in many ways.

Methamphetamine use can cause excessive acne, dry skin, and itchiness that causes obsessive scratching and picking of the skin—resulting in multiple small sores and scars on the face

and body. And like tobacco use, meth use suppresses the appetite and can lead to dramatic weight loss and a gaunt, skeletal appearance. For many meth addicts, the long-term combination of dry mouth, poor oral hygiene, and teeth grinding caused by use of the drug results in extreme tooth decay known as “meth mouth.”

Abuse of cocaine often leads to damaged cartilage in the nose—and in extreme cases, a complete collapse of the septum due to loss of blood supply to the area. And like other drugs, cocaine suppresses the appetite and can result in a pale skin tone and emaciated face and body.

With frequent heroin use comes abscesses or boils from injecting the drug. An abscess is an infection from deep within the skin. When the center of an abscess softens, pus fills the wound and must be surgically drained. Heroin addicts often suffer from scarring due to skin changes and bruises along injection sites.

Loss of appetite also occurs with heroin use, resulting in dehydration and lack of adequate nutrition. Heroin addicts lack essential vitamins and minerals in the body needed to nourish the skin and hair. This causes premature aging and weakens the immune system, making the user prone to sickness. Prolonged or frequent illness can also cause premature aging.

Smoking Ruins Health and Looks

Excessive smoking (of any substance) can deplete nutrients and reduce

blood flow, leaving skin dry and discolored. When the skin is deprived of essential nutrients, smokers can appear pale or have uneven skin tone. The act of smoking can also cause wrinkles around the mouth, giving the appearance of early aging.

Smoke entering the lungs can cause upper respiratory infections and result in deep coughs, earaches, and sore throats. Smoking damages elastin fibers and can cause sagging and drooping of other vulnerable areas like the breasts and upper arms. Smoking can also yellow the teeth and cause other oral and dental problems. Longtime smokers often experience bad breath, gum disease, and tooth loss. People who smoke are more prone to hair loss, cataracts, psoriasis, crow’s feet around the eyes, oral cancer, and lung cancer.

To see examples of how drug and alcohol abuse can change a person’s appearance, go to: <http://www.rebelcircus.com/blog/face-changes-different-drug-habits/>.

Conclusion

Drinking and smoking are not only harmful to one’s health; they can also cause premature aging and change a person’s appearance—for the worse. And the more a person uses drugs, the more difficult it is to care for himself or herself physically. If you have a loved one or family member and see a deteriorating physical appearance and have reason to believe that drugs are to blame, get them help right away.