

Sun damage is one of the major causes of premature ageing — and Australians are particularly vulnerable. Medical specialists explain what we can do to protect our skin.

# BEFORE TIME

**A** new study of identical twins has found that sun exposure, smoking and stress are the main causes of premature facial ageing.

The study followed 186 pairs of identical twins and was published in the April edition of *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, the Journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. It identified the environmental factors that contribute to facial ageing including body mass index, cigarette smoking, sun exposure, hormone replacement, alcohol consumption, antidepressant use and marital status.

Not surprisingly, it found increased sun exposure, a history of outdoor activities and not using sunscreen, were associated with an older appearance and accelerated with age. Smoking facially aged a twin two-and-a-half years for every 10 years they smoked, while those who avoided alcohol were perceived to be significantly younger when compared with their drinking twin.

Whether a twin was married, divorced or widowed also affected

their appearance, with divorced women appearing older than their married or single counterpart by 1.7 years. Interestingly, a twin who was a widow or widower appeared about two years younger than the twin who was not.

“Detecting these factors and educating the public can enormously reduce the amount of skin damage and the need for rejuvenation,” the researchers wrote. “However, in these studies, despite their size, one cannot control for one of the most important contributors of ageing: genetics.”

Kurt Gebauer, associate professor of dermatology at the University of WA, said excessive sun exposure was mainly responsible for facial ageing and the wear and tear most commonly complained about. This included sunspots, dryness, and fine lines and wrinkles such as crow’s feet and frown lines

He said sun damage could be minimised by wearing sunscreen, a hat, sunglasses and long sleeves and avoiding going outdoors in peak heat.

“Over time, the sun’s ultraviolet light damages the fibres in the skin

called elastin,” Dr Gebauer said. “The breakdown of these fibres causes the skin to lose its ability to snap back after stretching which causes wrinkles to form. Cigarette smoking causes lots of fine wrinkles around the eyes and lips too which increases with the amount of cigarettes and number of years a person has smoked.”

Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons spokesman Mark Hanikeri said people in Europe generally looked younger and had better skin than Australians because they had less sun damage. He said the secret to maintaining a healthy appearance was to stay out of the sun, get plenty of rest, eat well and lead a healthy lifestyle.

“The UV-damage that happens to our skin probably happens in the first 25 to 30 years of life so anything you do to avoid the sun will have a huge impact on facial ageing later on,” Dr Hanikeri said.

Dr Gebauer said skin disorders such as acne, rosacea and melasma as well as superficial blemishes (broken capillaries, freckles and dry spots)

also left a lasting impression on facial skin. There were many preventive and treatment options for these conditions.

“If you have a significant skin issue, you should get it looked at by someone who knows what they are talking about and not seek a quick fix at the beautician,” he said.

Dr Hanikeri said people were increasingly turning to cosmetic procedures such as facelifts, wrinkle relaxers (Botox), soft-tissue fillers, chemical peels and laser and light therapies to reverse the signs of ageing and iron out skin imperfections. He said the popularity of these types of therapy had grown because television shows like *Extreme Makeover* had made them more mainstream.

“These were initially viewed as only being for the wealthy or for celebrities but these shows demonstrate anyone, including males, can have them,” he said. “It’s no different to going to get your hair coloured or seeing a beauty therapist for eyeliner tattooing.”

While there had been a surge in

demand for non-surgical cosmetic procedures, people were still opting for surgery when non-surgical techniques no longer produced a lasting or an effective result, Dr Hanikeri said.

“You don’t look young one day and the next day you wake up and look old and therefore non-surgical procedures have allowed patients to look pretty good until they reach a point where their effectiveness wanes,” he said.

“When you are in the lower end of the spectrum of facial ageing, then those non-surgical techniques are appropriate and will help restore and maintain the youthful look such as facial fullness, lack of lines and skin quality.”

The current trend for facelifts in Australia was a less-invasive technique called a MACS lift, otherwise known as a Minimal Access Cranial Suspension lift.

Though this was not a new surgical technique, he said it was more popular because it required less surgery, therefore making it safer and less obtrusive.