As I have gotten older, I have noticed the texture of my skin has changed. It is dry and lackluster. I also have age spots. Is there anything I can use topically on my skin to improve its appearance?

Yes, there are topical products you can use to improve the appearance of your skin. With so many products available, it is sometimes difficult to know what actually works. There are a couple ingredients that board-certified dermatologists recommend.

**Retinoids**

This group of chemical compounds (retinol, retinal and trans retinoic acid) all come from Vitamin A. If you are only going to use one topical, this should be it! It is available in both over the counter (OTC) and prescriptions forms depending on the formulation and strength. To understand which formulation is best, it is important to know a little bit about Vitamin A. Vitamin A’s role in skin health has been known for years. It increases skin turnover giving your skin a healthy glow, increases collagen production helping to improve the appearance of fines lines and wrinkles and inhibits the production of melanin (the pigment in your skin) to improve any discoloration. In order to be used by the body, Vitamin A must be converted into its active form, retinoic acid.

Vitamin A → Retinol → Retinal → Retinoic Acid (active form)

Both the retinol and retinal forms are available OTC. Because both of these forms need to be converted to reach the active form, they tend to be gentler on the skin, however, they also are not as strong. The active form, retinoic acid or “tretinoin” is available with a prescription. It ranges in strength from 0.025 – 0.1 percent. It has a more direct effect on receptors than its retinol and retinal counterparts. All retinoids can cause skin irritation. In the beginning, your dermatologist may advise you to use it every other day and slowly increase to daily as your skin tolerates.

**Glycolic acid**

It exfoliates the skin by loosening up dead skin cells leading to more vibrant skin. Glycolic acid also builds up collagen in your skin, leading to the appearance of wrinkles. It is available in up to 20 percent OTC. Higher concentrations are used for chemical peels. It should be incorporated into your daily skin care routine and can be used even if you are using a retinoid. You can either use glycolic acid in the morning and the retinoid at night or alternate nightly.
I have been hearing a lot about the addition of antioxidants in skin care products. Do they actually work?

Antioxidants are a great addition to your skin care routine. They act by protecting your skin from free radicals, which are generated by UV exposure. These free radicals cause wrinkles, old age spots and skin cancers.

Applying an antioxidant serum or cream along with your sunscreen daily can shield your skin from the effects of free radicals. Examples of antioxidants include vitamin A, C, E and B3. Not every antioxidant is created equal. It is important to research the quality of the product before purchasing a product.

What are topical growth factors?

Growth factors are signaling molecules found throughout the body that travel between cells and relay important information about growth, healing and survival. Growth factors play an important role in collagen production and skin regeneration, both which keep the skin looking young.

Topical growth factors found in serums, gels or creams can be applied to the top of the skin, signaling your skin cells to increase in collagen production. Topical growth factors can be used on their own or used in combination with your skin care regimen.

I have dark spots and uneven pigmentation on my skin. Is there anything I can use?

The best way to prevent dark spots from forming is sun protection. However, there are topical cream you can use to help get rid of them once they are there. Dermatologists typically recommend topical hydroquinone to target those pesky dark spots. It is available OTC in two percent concentration or as a prescription at four percent. Depending on the extent of skin damage and your skin type, your dermatologist may recommend other treatments as well including peels or intense pulse dyed light.

Before starting any topical treatment regimen, speak with a board-certified dermatologist to come up with a plan tailored to your skin care needs. You can find one near you at asds.net/find.