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HEALTH

Walk into any pharmacy, beauty store, airport kiosk, or scroll through social media for five minutes, and you will be convinced that collagen is the answer to everything. Better skin? Take collagen. Hairfall? Take collagen. Knee pain? Take collagen. Ageing? Definitely take collagen.

As a nutritionist who has spent over 20 years in clinical practice, I have watched nutrition trends come and go. From detox teas and fat-burning coffees to activated charcoal and celery juice, every few years a new miracle ingredient captures public imagination. Collagen is the latest superstar.

The difference is that unlike many wellness fads, collagen is not entirely hype. But it is also not the magic bullet it is often marketed to be.

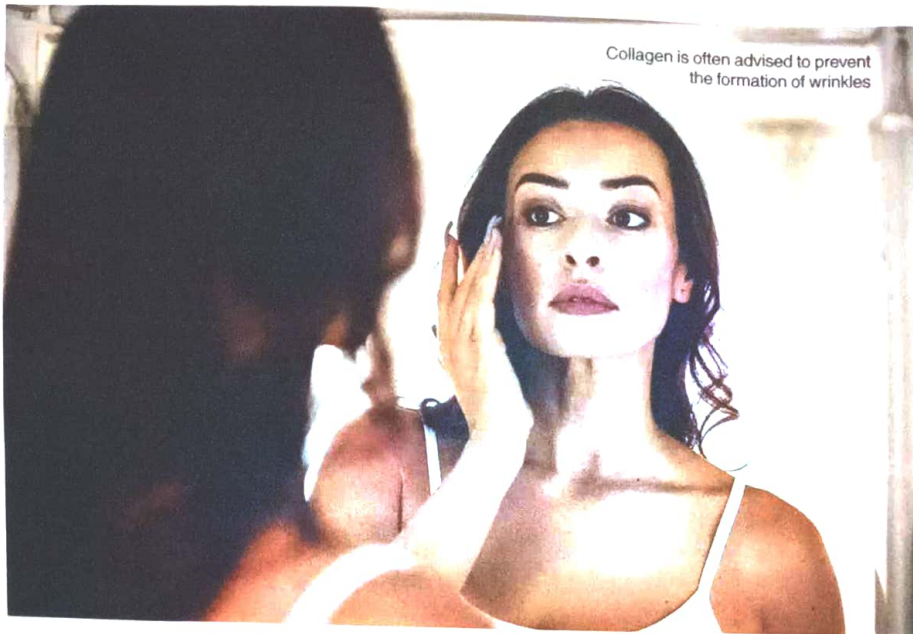
In my clinic, I see three kinds of collagen consumers. The first are women in their late 30s and 40s who come in carrying expensive tubs of collagen powder and asking whether it will erase wrinkles. The second are fitness enthusiasts who add collagen to smoothies assuming it is equivalent to protein powder. The third are people above 50 who have been advised collagen supplements for joint pain and osteoarthritis.

What surprises many of them is that collagen is neither a beauty product nor a medicine. It is simply a protein.

Collagen is the most abundant protein in the human body. It forms the structural framework of our skin, bones, tendons, ligaments, blood vessels and connective tissue. Think of it as the scaffolding that keeps everything supported and intact.

The challenge is that from our mid-20s onwards, collagen production naturally begins to decline. Factors such as stress, smoking, excessive sugar intake, poor sleep, pollution and prolonged sun exposure accelerate this process. The result is visible ageing of the skin, reduced skin elasticity, slower recovery from exercise and increased joint discomfort.

This is where collagen supplements enter the conversation. The scientific evidence suggests that hydrolysed collagen peptides may improve skin hydration, skin elasticity and reduce the appearance of fine lines when consumed consistently over several months. Some studies also show modest benefits for joint comfort, especially in active adults and older individuals.



THE COLLAGEN CRAZE

Can powders and gummies actually improve skin, hair and joints?

But here is the part that social media rarely discusses. When you consume collagen powder or gummies, your body does not magically send that collagen directly to your face or knees. The collagen is first broken down into amino acids during digestion, just like any other protein. Your body then decides where those amino acids are needed most.

If you are sleep deprived, stressed, eating poorly and deficient in protein, your body is unlikely to prioritise wrinkle reduction. It is more concerned with essential repair and maintenance functions. This is why I often see patients spending thousands of rupees on premium collagen supplements while simultaneously skipping breakfast, eating inadequate protein and sleeping five hours a night.

One of my patients, a successful television personality in her 40s, came to me frustrated after six months of collagen supplementation. She felt there was no visible improvement despite investing in some of the most expensive products available. When we reviewed her diet, she was consuming barely 35g of protein a day. She frequently skipped meals and travelled extensively for work.

The issue was not collagen deficiency. The issue was overall protein deficiency. Once her protein intake improved, her skin quality, energy levels and recovery improved significantly. The collagen supplement became an addition rather than a rescue plan.

Another common misconception involves hair health. Many people assume collagen directly stimulates hair growth. The evidence here is far less convincing. Hair growth depends on multiple factors, including iron status, protein intake, thyroid function, hormonal balance, stress levels and genetics. In fact, in my practice, low ferritin levels, chronic dieting and inadequate protein are far more common causes of hairfall than collagen deficiency. A collagen gummy may be easier to market than correcting iron deficiency, but biology does not always cooperate with marketing.

What concerns me even more is the growing trend of replacing real food with supplements. I frequently meet young professionals who consume collagen coffee in the morning, protein bars throughout the day and gummy supplements at night while barely eating fruits,

vegetables, pulses or quality proteins.

No supplement can replicate the complexity of nutrients found in whole foods. For collagen production, your body requires not only amino acids but also vitamin C, zinc, copper and various antioxidants. Without these nutrients, collagen synthesis cannot occur efficiently. This means that guava, amla, citrus fruits, berries, nuts, seeds, pulses and adequate protein intake remain just as important as any supplement sitting on your kitchen shelf.

There is another factor that deserves more attention: sugar. One of the least discussed reasons for accelerated skin ageing is a process called glycation. Excess sugar binds to proteins, including collagen, making them stiff and less functional. This contributes to wrinkles and loss of skin elasticity over time.

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Ironically, some collagen gummies marketed for beauty contain added sugars. Consumers are often trying to protect collagen while simultaneously consuming ingredients that may damage it. As clinicians, we sometimes joke that reducing sugar intake may do more for skin quality than adding another beauty supplement.

So, should you take collagen? My answer is the same answer I give many of my patients: it depends.

If you are above 35, physically active, recovering from injury, experiencing joint discomfort, or interested in supporting skin health as part of a broader wellness strategy, collagen supplementation may offer benefits.

However, collagen works best when the fundamentals are already in place. Adequate protein intake. Good sleep. Regular exercise. Stress management. A nutrient-rich diet. And protection from excessive sun exposure. Without these foundations, collagen becomes another expensive attempt to compensate for lifestyle gaps.

After 20 years in practice, one lesson has remained remarkably consistent. People are always searching for the next miracle nutrient, while health continues to be built through ordinary daily habits.

Collagen may help. The science suggests it can. But the real secret to healthy skin, stronger joints and graceful ageing is not hidden in a gummy bear or a flavoured powder. It is hidden in the things that are far less glamorous and far more powerful: nourishing food, movement, recovery and consistency. And unfortunately for marketers, those habits cannot be sold in a jar.



Collagen powder added to smoothies is a common way to take it