

JOSEPH A. PURSCH, M.D.

Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Your Face and Skin Show Your Alcoholism

Mechanically speaking, your skin is a seamless body stocking that sets your physical boundaries: It keeps vital fluids in, noxious agents out and tells you what's going on (hot? cold? smooth? rough?) outside of you.

But medically speaking, your skin is a printout of diagnostic information: A real-time video screen of your psyche, e.g. blushing joy, blanching shock, anxious sweat, and hair-rising anger. It's also a long-term barometer of your internal organs and a permanent chronicle of your past behaviors.

Thus, your skin is more like a window than a wall. If you have alcoholism, for example, it reveals more than it hides.

Here is what clinicians see:

If you're an early-stage alcoholic, you shrug off your morning-after reddish face and bloodshot eyes as "happy hour drinking signs" because they're usually gone by noon. But a decade later the ruddy face and muddy eyes stay on – and mark you as a heavy drinker.

Excess fluids round your puffy face, bag your rheumy eyes and bury your cheekbones (not a happy sign, especially if your sultry eyes and classy cheek bones were your best features). The bulbous purple nose (rhinophyma), mostly in males, is another late-stage landmark.

Let's face it: Liquor and looks are not compatible. If you're a woman, there is more: damage to the skin's elastin fibers, aging wrinkles which – like a bad wine – appear before their time. Eventually, even in dimly lit saloons, makeup can't cover the bronzy skin. With sagging neck and barroom voice, the alcoholic transformation is complete: From luscious lady to lady lush.

In both men and women, clinical examination of the skin as a whole reflects the damage to internal

organs. Yellow jaundice means liver disease. So do spider nevi, the tiny, dilated, spider-like veins around the upper chest and collarbones. Paleness and easy bruising, especially in light-skinned women, reflect anemia and blood-clotting trouble caused by alcoholic poisoning of the bone marrow, which is the body's blood cell factory.

In men, hair distribution changes. When hair – chest, underarms and pubic – get sparse, it's a tip-off that breast enlargement (gynecomastia) along with shriveling testicles, higher-pitched voice and impotence are soon to follow.

Since alcohol is an anesthetic, the skin also records the damage sustained when the drinker was passed out, i.e. "feeling no pain."

Here are common signs:

- Second-degree sunburn – on only one side of the body. (In normal sleep, we automatically turn from side to side every half hour. But alcohol anesthetizes the brain. So, when heavy drinkers pass out, they often stay in the same position, even in a scorching sun.)
- Cigarette burns between fingers and on the chest from repeatedly falling asleep while smoking, not feeling the pain and not smelling the smoke. (If it happens in bed, the consequences can be tragic.)
- Massive insect bites after "sleeping" outdoors. This happens not only to wino vagrants who pass out in the weeds, because they are homeless, but also to middle-class campers who pass out in the weeds because they are too drunk to unlock the door of their RV.
- Skin ulcers or bedsores, from lying in one position all night, aggravated by urine-soaked bedding or even designer-label clothing.

The skin also records the evidence of poor judgment, memory lapses and bizarre trauma situations that are the alcoholics' lot.

Common signs are:

- Embarrassing tattoos, covered by long-sleeves or turtleneck clothes. (A surgeon I know is never seen bare-chested except in the doctor's locker room where his tattoos – acquired when he was a drunken sailor – make him the occasional butt of unkind jokes.)
- Large bruises, sprains, fractures – even amputations – due to frostbite or motorcycle wrecks, none of which the patient can clearly recall or explain.
- Gunshot wounds due to “accidental” shootings on hunting trips, due to one drunk shot by another.
- Scars from knife fights, wrist scars from suicide attempts and tracheotomy scars from intensive care unit treatment of accidental or suicidal overdoses.

The good news

Since the skin of alcoholics is a graphic dermal “drunkalogue,” it also records the positive signs on the road back to health and recovery.

The first signs of recovery, like the late signs of alcoholism, are also written in the face: The eyes are clear, the bags disappear, the skin has a healthy glow, excess fluids disappear and classy cheekbones reappear.

That's when the alcoholic's friends rejoice, “Hey, it looks like we've got the old 'you' back.”

Dr. Pursch's Office

949-499-5631

©2003 Joseph Pursch, MD

www.drpursch.com
