

HOLE-Y MOLE-Y

Ever been tempted to remove your moles? Maybe you won't, now that a new study indicates moles may mean longer life.

Moles have had their place in the limelight with celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Madonna and Cindy Crawford highlighting them as beauty spots.

Here in Asia, though, where the benchmark for beauty is flawless, porcelain skin, a mole may not make the mark of beauty at all. In fact, mole removal is one of the most popular procedures at dermatologists and aesthetic physicians.

Now, however, anyone covered in them should apparently count their blessings – dot by dot. Scientists are claiming that those with lots of moles are years younger biologically than those without.

WHAT ARE MOLES?

Moles are growths on the skin that develop from melanocytes, our skin's pigment-producing cells. Usually dark in colour, they can be flat, raised, or even textured.

Dr Patrina Wong, medical aesthetic director of LinC Aesthetic Clinic, explains that moles are "space-occupying lesions. If you removed a mole, there will be a space or hole where it used to be. The skin will then granulate and fill up the space, and the effect is a microscopic scar, similar to the pores on our skin."

And now, a new study suggests that people with many moles have skin cells that age more slowly than their less "dotty" counterparts. This is good news for those who up till now have been told that they were at a greater risk of melanoma (skin cancer).

THE SECRET TO YOUTH

It has to do with something called telomeres, the DNA at the ends of chromosomes which, like the plastic tips of shoelaces, protect them from disintegrating. As we age, our telomeres become shorter. And shorter telomere length in turn has been linked to chronic diseases like diabetes and atherosclerosis.

Observing that moles tend to



disappear with age, scientists at the Twin Research Unit at King's College London examined the relationship between the number of moles and telomere length, and whether it can be an indication of the rate of ageing. They found that long telomeres in the white blood cells correlate with slowed ageing of several organs and tissues, such as the heart and bone. This implies a reduced susceptibility to age-related diseases such as heart disease or osteoporosis. The results showed that twins with longer telomeres seemed to keep their moles for longer and to seem to age more slowly.

Meanwhile research led by Dr Veronique Bataille, a consultant dermatologist at King's College London, made the link between moles and ageing after studying the white blood cells of more than 1,800 women aged between 18 and 79. They found that "the women with the most moles, more than 100, have the longest telomeres and a biological age that is six to seven years younger than those with fewer than 25, because of the difference in the length of

their telomeres."

However, Dr Bataille acknowledges that the study does not prove that longer telomeres cause moles to endure and that having moles is necessarily a good thing. "As a dermatologist, I want to emphasise that if a mole changes in size, shape or colour, you should see a doctor."

TO REMOVE OR KEEP?

A consultation is advisable for the doctor to assess if removal is required. "Safety first. The most critical indication to decide if a mole needs removal is the potential for malignancy. If the mole is suspected to be cancerous and will therefore affect your health, it is mandatory to remove it," says Dr Wong. She recommends the relatively painless and fuss-free Carbon Dioxide Laser.

"The rest of the reasons that lean towards removal are cosmetic preferences and personal beliefs," she adds.

In other words, the decision to remove a mole that is not a health concern is entirely up to you.

