Not only is the skin our largest organ but, for the careful observer, it often reveals vital information about an array of disease states that, in early stages, are free of symptoms,” notes Dr. Laura Briley of Southern Dermatology, PA, in Raleigh.

“For example, rashes appearing as pimples, lumps, bumps, and blisters can in fact be visible clues to such underlying conditions as kidney, liver, thyroid, or even Hodgkin’s disease, as well as diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, or connective tissue disorders such as lupus. Even a condition as common as xanthoma may signal an underlying problem.”

Health&Healing: What is xanthoma?

**DR. BRILEY:** It’s a condition that can forewarn elevated cholesterol, which is often a precursor of heart disease. Basically, xanthoma, usually in older patients, is a concentration of fat beneath the surface of the skin. As a result of that concentration, the skin takes on a yellowish hue. Xanthoma appears in patches on the skin and has a slightly bumpy texture. It usually appears on the eyelids, knees and elbows. And it is a good example of a silent disease: It does not itch, nor is it painful. The important point is that xanthoma may be a symptom of underlying metabolic disorders that are associated with an increase in blood lipids—such as diabetes and some types of cancer. We can surgically remove these bumps, but the key is to identify and control the underlying disorders.

There are connective tissue diseases, such as lupus, that can also at times be detected by way of our skin. Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease, ranging from mild to severe, in which the immune system becomes hyperactive and attacks normal tissue. Sometimes lupus may first show up as a rash on the face, often in a design similar to a wolf’s face—across the cheeks and nose. Lupus is the Latin word for wolf. It’s not uncommon for an early-stage lupus rash to be misdiagnosed as rosacea by a practitioner who is simply unaccustomed to seeing the variety of rashes and skin conditions that make up the professional life of a dermatologist.”

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