

# Can Stress Affect the Skin?

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**STRESS.** We all know what this word means since we have experienced it sometime. Even my nine-year-old son mentioned the word stress last year when his insensitive basketball coach was mistreating him and destroying his self esteem. As a result, he was itching. Anytime my 16-year-old patient C.S. feels nervous, her acne gets worse. J.B., my 35-year-old patient, feels so sorry for himself that his eczema flares up when he is assigned a stressful job. K.M. can't stop pulling out her eyebrows when she is under stress. My friend and patient C.C. came out with shingles (Herpes Zoster) under her breast as a consequence of all the stress she experienced because of her husband's multiple cardiac bypass surgery. M.H. was depressed and could not stop scratching her face. When she started coming to my office, her face was covered with ulcers and deep self-inflicted wounds.

I could give you hundreds more examples of stress-aggravated skin conditions. Stress is increasingly becoming a major contributing health problem, affecting every system and organ in the body. The role of stress on the skin has been overlooked. However, today most experts agree that stress can aggravate certain conditions, most likely by altering the skin's integrity. Stress can aggravate conditions like Herpes, Seborrheic Dermatitis, Acne, Rosacea, Psoriasis, Eczema, Hives and even conditions like Hair Loss and Hirsutism (excess facial and body hair). During stressful times most people with these conditions will notice worsening of the symptoms or people that never had these conditions before will develop a primary episode.

## How Does Stress Work?

A stressful situation triggers the release of hormones in the body that alter the normal balance. When stress becomes chronic, the body's biochemistry changes, upsetting the delicate hormonal balance. By upsetting this balance, stress becomes a major flare factor for all the dermatologic



conditions mentioned above. Acne is a great example, having been associated with wedding day jitters, prom, job interviews and school exams. Uncontrolled stress can also trigger an increased rate of hair loss; we notice increased shedding of hair during stressful times, due also to hormonal imbalance. People under stress develop harmful habits like nail biting, lip licking, pulling of hair, eyebrows and eyelashes (trichotillomania) and deep scratching and self-inflicted ulcers. Hirsutism (excess body and facial hair) is also related to hormonal imbalance and certainly has been linked to stress as well.

## What Does Stressed Skin Look Like?

Oil production usually increases, so acne becomes more prominent. Histamine triggers itchiness and inflammation, and that is why people under stress itch and constantly scratch. Sometimes it can be the opposite and instead of getting oily the skin gets dry and flaky, especially in winter time. This time of the year it is common to see people with chapped lips develop the habit of licking and sometimes biting their lips. Conditions like atopic dermatitis worsen with stress, especially in children. Topical

steroids and emollients help with this, as well as stress control techniques. Hair and eyebrow pulling, scratching and ulcerating the skin, although self-destructive habits, which are soothing is some way to the patients, and that is why it is hard to break these bad habits.

## Mind and Skin Connection

The mind and the skin are intimately intertwined. You name it, many skin disorders have their roots in the psyche. Experts are calling this new field "psychodermatology." This field allows a more integrative approach to treating skin conditions that are stress aggravated. This approach allows for more treatment possibilities including antidepressants, relaxation techniques or counseling that can alleviate these problems. Bruce Katz, M.D., Director of the Juva Skin and Laser Center in New York and professor of Dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical School, explains it in this way: "It's the target organ theory. People channel stress through different organs. Some people get ulcers, some get migraine and others skin rashes as the skin is the target organ".

## Living Happily Ever After

What can you do to insure a stress free existence and gorgeous-looking skin? Try these steps.

- Take a deep breath and slow down. Remember the day we depart from this world, we are not taking anything. Live one day at a time.
- Maintain adequate nutrition and a healthy diet. Less fast food, more vegetables, fish, dairy products, eggs, fruits and high protein grains. It is easier and faster to just get fast food, but it is not going to help you. Decrease caffeine intake. Drink plenty of water. Decrease carbonated drinks like sodas.
- Avoid smoking. Particularly in anyone prone to depression, smoking has been shown to reduce natural immunity, making the body more vulnerable to stress.
- Get enough quality sleep. Calming aromatherapy, a relaxing massage, a hot bath before going to bed or if you have a partner sex will also help you get a good night sleep.
- Exercise is considered a great stress buster. Yoga is my favorite technique. Walking is also great and so is riding your bike or any kind of exercise that makes you happy.
- Get a hobby; life can't be only work. Do what you like the most. You don't need to spend lots of money to get a hobby. Writing is one of my hobbies, and I really enjoy it.
- Take a vacation. You don't need to go to China to take a break, just get away with your family. But if your family is the main cause of your stress then just take time off for yourself, be selfish and please don't feel guilty.
- Practice meditation
- Get a skin check up once a year. Use good medical grade skin products and don't go to bed without washing your face.
- If your skin is already in bad shape, there are many advanced treatments available today to get a radiant look, and that is what cosmetic dermatology is all about. Looking good also helps makes you feel great.

Life is stressful for everyone, but there is no need for that to show. So take a deep breath, smell the roses and call us if you need help.

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