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How stress is damaging your skin

Stress less, save face

Michele Thompson, MS

If you think the current economic situation has taken a toll on your wallet, you might be surprised to learn that your financial stress may also be taking a toll on your skin. Dermatologist Dr Art Papier, founder and chief scientific officer of Logical Images in Rochester, New York, is not surprised that the current recession has led to an increase in patients wondering why they have developed wrinkles, acne or other skin conditions. Keep reading to learn how stress may be negatively impacting your skin health.



Skin health is directly related to stress

According to Dr Papier, developer of the leading consumer skin health website www.visualdxhealth.com, there is certainly a direct correlation to stress and skin

breakouts. “Clinical proof shows it has to do with hormones,” the dermatologist explains. “Under stress, levels of cortisol, which is the major stress hormone, increase. This in turn breaks down collagen and causes inflammation. The result is [flare ups of] psoriasis, adult acne and rosacea. And, don’t forget fine lines and wrinkles!”

Skin conditions aggravated by stress

It isn’t just a coincidence that you experience a breakout during times of heightened stress. “Every day dermatologists see patients who have some manifestation of stress that is visible on the skin,” says Dr Papier. And it isn’t limited to acne. “Stress can aggravate many skin conditions and even infectious diseases, such as herpes and shingles viral infections, that manifest on the skin,” he adds.

Itchy conditions aggravated by stress include hives, known as urticaria in medical terms; forms of eczema; and other chronic itching and rubbing conditions, such as lichen simplex chronicus, a condition where itching and rubbing become a vicious cycle resulting in skin so chronically rubbed that the skin thickens and further perpetuates the itch-rub cycle.

Picking and itching simply make it worse

The itching and rubbing cycle that occurs during stressful times can further damage the skin that is already compromised with acne or another skin condition. It can even turn into a chronic compulsion. Dr Papier explains, “Conditions aggravated by stress range from common acne that is picked at by the anxious or nervous patient, to severe dermatologic conditions such as prurigo nodularis, an often intractable condition that involves relentless itch and chronic rubbing and picking of the skin.”

Stress is linked to itching

According to Dr Papier, patients with severe itch often confide to their physicians that they are stressed out or are high-strung individuals. “The relationship between the sensation of itch and the reflex mechanism of scratching is clear,” says the skin expert. “Just the mention of the word lice or scabies in a room can cause people to sense an itch and start scratching!”

However, the mechanism of how stress causes itch is not entirely clear. Certainly, there are genetic factors that interplay with hormonal factors in conditions such as acne or rosacea, but on top of these factors is the impact of stress. “Stress likely boosts certain natural chemicals in the skin and blood vessels of the skin that might cause increased blood flow and redness in conditions such as rosacea,” Dr Papier explains. “Stress also impacts the immune system, which can make an individual more susceptible to infectious diseases.”

Find ways to manage your stress

In addition to the toll that stress takes on your skin, your mind and body also suffer. It is essential to find ways to manage your stress and deal with the hardships you are currently experiencing. If you feel that your stress load is too much for you to handle alone, talk to a trusted family member or friend or seek professional help.

In the meantime, there are many immediate and day to day things you can do to take care of yourself. Here are some helpful links to get you started:

- Improve your health and reduce stress through journaling
- Relax, recharge and stress less
- Simplify and de-stress with these websites
- SWEEP away family stress
- Dealing with mommy stress

Talk to your dermatologist about healthy skin habits

Dr Papier is quick to point out that managing stress is easier said than done. “It is easy for doctors to say, ‘Minimize stress,’ to patients, but if a patient has lost his or her job or has other major stress points in life, such words of advice are really not that helpful.”

However, you can be mindful of your skin care habits and minimize further damage by following your dermatologist’s advice on taking the best care of your skin while you are experiencing high-stress times.

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