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BREAKOUTS, PREMATURE AGEING, DRY SKIN AND IRRITATION. THEY'RE ALL PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF THE STRESS WE'RE UNDER - BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO FIGHT AGAINST IT. FIND OUT HOW TO PUT YOUR BEST FACE FORWARD

It's written all over your face

By Michelle Bateman

STRESS

FEELING TENSE?

We know that stress looms all too large in your life – in a recent survey almost one-third of you told us you're more stressed now than you were a year ago*.

Here's the thing: over millions of years, the human body has evolved to create a pretty sophisticated response to stress, pumping extra adrenaline and cortisol and increasing the supply of blood and oxygen to the limbs. Sure, it gives you enhanced capacities to deal with stressful situations, whether you choose to stay and face matters or run for the hills. But over time, these extra hormones can cause problems for other parts of your body – including its largest organ, your skin.

It's so significant that Dr Amy Wechsler, a US-based dermatologist and psychiatrist, and author of *The Mind-Beauty Connection* (amazon.com), has coined a new term to describe it: "stress ageing". It is, she says, "today's biggest skin and health challenge".

The relationship between stress and skin is less a one-way street than a multi-lane highway, and there's a growing body of research examining the underlying connections and what you can do about it.

"Long-term stress can impact health by affecting immunity," explains *WH* dermatology expert Dr Elizabeth Dawes-Higgs. "Stressful events can lead to the onset or exacerbation of skin diseases and, over time, hair loss and poor nail growth can also become a problem."

Translation: the fight-or-flight response may be good news when you're face-to-face with an idiot on the street, but not so much when you're suddenly confronted with an irritated, inflamed or generally lacklustre complexion in the mirror.

"With immediate stress, the skin becomes pale and sweaty," says Melbourne-based dermatologist and All About Acne** advisor Dr Mei Tam. "However with prolonged stress, the skin responds to androgen hormones, producing more oil, becoming more inflamed and causing spots. The skin texture also becomes coarser."

Naturally, the sight of an Everest-sized zit or a dry, dull complexion only leads to more stress and the cycle begins again.

Symptom #1 Itching for relief

The extra cortisol that gets pumped into your system when you're stressed can compromise the skin's function as a barrier (yep, the epidermis), says Dr Dawes-Higgs. "Prolonged disruption of this barrier can lead to dermatitis and infections. The skin is then more prone to problems of irritants, allergens and bacteria being able to penetrate [it]," she explains.

Add to this a surge of chemicals known as neuropeptides, released by the skin to protect it from trauma or infection – unfortunately they also result in itchiness and sensitivity. And according to US dermatologist

and clinical psychologist Dr Richard Fried, they can be triggered by any general stress as well as a legitimate trauma. Skin doesn't distinguish between a cut or scrape and that big client presentation you have coming up at work – its temporary freak-out is a defence mechanism either way.

What this means, says Dr Tam, is "skin that would otherwise cope with exposure to particular ingredients in some make-up or fragrances becomes inflamed and reacts with dryness, redness, stinging or itching, and rashes."

Do this When your epidermis is being compromised from the inside, Dr Dawes-Higgs recommends protecting it from the outside. "Use a soap-free wash to limit the amount of natural oils stripped from the skin

during washing, and moisturise to improve barrier function. Also try a healthy diet, relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga and reducing alcohol," she says.

Dr Tam agrees that supplementing skincare with stress-management techniques can help, recommending "cognitive behavioural therapy, psychotherapy, group therapy and support groups have been shown to be beneficial in the management of eczema and psoriasis."

Try these QV Face Rescue Gel, \$19.95 (a); Dove Sensitive Skin Nourishing Body Wash, \$7.36 (b); SebaMed Liquid Face & Body Wash, \$14.95 for 300ml (c); Burt's Bees Sensitive Daily Moisturizing Cream, \$29.95 (d); Dermalogica Ultra Calming Relief Masque, \$68.50 (e).



Chow down

Where stress goes, junk food, comfort eating and skipped meals often follow. *WH* nutrition expert Kristen Beck shares what you should be eating to give your body a boost:

Beetroot

It's packed full of vitamin C, antioxidants and iron (all of which get used up during times of stress). Some studies have also found that beetroot can even help lower blood pressure. Bonus.

Trailmix

This handbag snack will provide some healthy fats, vitamins, protein and fibre. It also helps to balance your blood sugar and curb hunger, which can make stress and anxiety worse.

Protein-rich foods

Foods such as fish, chicken, turkey, lean meat, eggs and tofu can all help to boost levels of dopamine, a hormone that helps you focus and reduces cravings for sweet foods.

Fresh fruits and berries

Stress eats up water-soluble vitamins (the B group and C). Fresh fruits and berries, particularly blueberries, are rich in vitamin C and antioxidants that help reduce negative effects of stress on skin.

Chocolate

Hurrah! It boosts serotonin levels which helps you to relax. Aim for dark chocolate varieties that contain 70 per cent or more cocoa solids.

Symptom #2 Losing the glow



*FROM AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST HEALTH CHECK (WOMEN AGED 25-39 YEARS). A SURVEY OF 25,919 PEOPLE CONDUCTED BY WOMEN'S HEALTH IN CONJUNCTION WITH PREVENTION, SUNRISE AND Priceline. ** FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ALL ABOUT ACNE, VISIT ACNE.ORG.AU

When your lifestyle is otherwise pretty healthy (props to you), it can be easy enough to bounce back from the odd sleepless night or stressful event. But start backing them up and it's a surefire recipe for dull, ashen and lacklustre skin – and even fine lines and wrinkles.

"With prolonged stress the renewal of skin cells can slow down," says Dr Dawes-Higgs. This means fresh, new cells aren't making their way to the surface as regularly, resulting in a dull-looking visage or rougher skin. But it gets worse: "Skin can become dehydrated when you're stressed, which can make it look more wrinkled."

Stress also leads to the creation of more free radicals in the body,

which are responsible for many of the visible signs of ageing, says Aveeno's global research director, Dr Claude Saliou.

Do this Whenever your skin cell turnover needs a kick up the bum, regular exfoliation can help to gently slough away the dead surface cells to reveal fresh ones underneath. And for a little extra assistance, a vitamin C-infused serum, mask or treatment helps to rejuvenate the skin's appearance and may also help to boost collagen production at a deeper level.

To combat free radical damage, Dr Saliou recommends choosing skincare with added antioxidants to supplement the body's levels. There are various antioxidants that

may have benefits, but he advises feverfew. "It has some soothing properties, reduces the free radicals and irritation, and we found in a clinical study that it also helped to smooth the skin, particularly related to signs of ageing and even to reduce the appearance of wrinkles," he says.

Try these Ella Baché Radiance C Ampoule, \$188 for six ampoules (f); Comvita Olive White Brightening Facial Exfoliant, \$45 (g); Elizabeth Arden Intervene Stress Recovery Night Cream, \$92 (h); Elixia Nourishing Anti-Oxidant Serum, \$59.95 (i); Aveeno Ultra Calming Daily Moisturiser, \$24.99 (j); The Body Shop Vitamin C Skin Boost, \$36.50 (k). ➔

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The number of work days lost per employee each year due to stress

SOURCE: MEDIBANK PRIVATE

Symptom #3 The big breakout

On the morning of a hotly anticipated date, what are the chances you'll wake up with a pimple? Or, if you already have acne, that it'll look more red and irritated than usual? A recent study conducted on behalf of Neutrogena showed that 74 per cent of young women break out when they're stressed. And much like a five-year-old on a red cordial high, the culprit, says Dr Tam, is overstimulation. "Hormones released during prolonged or severe stress can overstimulate the cells responsible for oil production," she says. "This excess oil can then contribute to blocked pores and pimples." The skin itself responds by becoming more inflamed, which only makes the situation worse. **Do this** Acne is acne, regardless of whether it's brought about by stress, raging hormones or other factors, says Dr Tam, and as such, the recommended treatment for it doesn't change all that much. "Two of the basics are regular cleansing with a gentle non-soap cleanser and avoiding make-up and other products that can clog your skin," she recommends. "If the acne is mild, over-the-counter acne products containing benzoyl peroxide, salicylic or fruit acids are good first options to treat breakouts. For more severe acne, prescription products may be required, so you will need to see your GP."

Occasionally, a flare-up of acne called pyoderma faciale can be triggered two to four weeks out from a very stressful event – like your wedding – and is best addressed by a trip to the GP or dermatologist. "It usually requires emergency treatment of prednisolone [a steroid], high-dose antibiotics and isotretinoin," says Dr Tam.

Try these Neutrogena Oil Free Acne Stress Control Power Cream Wash, \$14.99 (l); Shiseido Pureness Blemish Targeting Gel, \$43 (m); Danné Montague-King Acne Wash, \$92 (n); Ultracuticals Ultra Clear Treatment Lotion, \$79 (o); Aveda Outer Peace Cooling Masque, \$69.95 (p).

What's stressing you?

We asked and here's what you told us:

57% Financial concerns

50% Lack of sleep

40% Not enough time to get through what's required in a day

SOURCE: AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST HEALTH CHECK



Symptom #4 Seeing red

Of all the stress-related conditions, perhaps the least understood is rosacea even though various international studies estimate up to 10 per cent of adults suffer from it, the majority of them women with fair skin. Rosacea is characterised by sensitive skin that reddens and flushes easily and painfully, and in some cases known as papulopustular rosacea, by raised red bumps and pimples. As recently as December 2011, a study from the University Medical Centre at Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, reported that while stress was an important factor in rosacea, the exact reasons why are still a mystery. And doctors at the School of Psychology at Murdoch University, Perth, recently found that people with serious rosacea have a greater propensity towards blushing, stress and social phobia than people without it.

Do this As rosacea can worsen over time, get into a good routine as early as possible. Gentle cleansing, moisturising and daily sunscreen use are essential, as are learning to identify your triggers (heat, cold, red wine and spicy food are all culprits, as well as stress). Plus, the team at Murdoch Uni found cognitive behavioural therapy can be useful in managing social anxiety – and the associated blushing that's often a side effect of rosacea.

Indeed, regardless of the stress-related symptoms, Dr Tam says that "coping strategies are important for reducing stress and taking better control... with fewer flare-ups and less anxiety. Being realistic about your treatment and prognosis are also important".

In other words, when your body is struggling between fighting and fleeing, take a third path and try finding some calm. Your skin will thank you for it.

Try these Clinique Redness Solutions Urgent Relief Cream, \$68 (q); Pevonia RS2 Gentle Cleanser, \$70 (r); Avène DiroSeal, \$35.95, available from Priceline (s); Cetaphil Gentle Skin Cleanser, \$9.50 for 250ml (t); Azclear Action Medicated Lotion, \$10.95 (u). **wh**

