

Are you stressing out your skin?

Learn how to help your complexion repair itself.



wellness lab

Your brain and your skin share a surprising connection, science shows. Here's how to feel better, inside and out.

by Pam O'Brien

Your complexion is a barometer of what you're thinking and feeling—and the link between the two is hardwired into us. It starts in the womb: "The skin and the brain are formed in the same embryological layer of cells," says Amy Wechsler, M.D., a dermatologist and a psychiatrist in New York. They split to create your nervous system and epidermis, "but they remain forever interconnected," she says.

That's why our skin, just like our psyche, is experiencing the fallout of these anxiety-ridden times. "I've had a lot more patients come in with acne and all sorts of skin problems," Dr. Wechsler says. "I've seen a lot of people who say, 'I swear I did not have this

wrinkle on my face before the pandemic started.' And they're right."

THE STRESS EFFECT The main culprit for most of these skin issues is stress. When we're under duress, our body starts pumping out the hormone cortisol, which in turn causes inflammation. "In short bursts, this isn't a problem," Dr. Wechsler says. It's part of the natural fight-or-flight response that helps us react quickly to difficult or emergency situations. "But when cortisol is elevated for days, weeks, or months, it leads to inflammatory skin conditions like acne, eczema, and psoriasis."

In addition, cortisol can prompt our skin to become "leaky"—meaning that it loses more water than normal, resulting in dryness,

Dr. Wechsler says. It's more sensitive too. "Suddenly you might not be able to tolerate a product, and you develop a rash," she says.

Cortisol also breaks down collagen in the skin, which can lead to wrinkles. And it slows the turnover of skin cells that usually happens every 30 days. "Dead cells begin to build up, and your skin looks dull," Dr. Wechsler says.

HOW TO MAKE YOU—AND YOUR SKIN—HAPPY AGAIN

First and foremost is sleep. "The hormones that help keep us healthy, like oxytocin, beta-endorphins, and growth hormones, are highest—and cortisol is lowest—when we're asleep," Dr. Wechsler says. "Get seven and a half to eight hours a night to let these beneficial hormones do their job, so your skin can repair and heal."

Also, make time for sex.

"Some people roll their eyes at me when I say this, but it works," Dr. Wechsler says. "Having an orgasm has been proved to help us sleep better, and it raises oxytocin and beta-endorphin levels and lowers cortisol."

Exercise has a similar effect. When you work out, your endorphins go up and cortisol drops, Dr. Wechsler says. Aim to do cardio and strength training regularly. (Just be sure to apply sunscreen liberally whenever you exercise outside.)

Finally, maintain your usual skin-care regimen. "This is especially important during periods of stress," Dr. Wechsler says. "It's good for your skin, it gives you a sense of control over your day, and it lets you take care of yourself. Once your skin looks better, you feel better too. It all comes full circle." ■