

# STRESSED ABOUT YOUR LOCKDOWN SKIN?

Eczema, spots, wrinkles... the stresses of the past year or so have led to a surge in people seeking the help of dermatologists. So what can you do about it? **Louise Atkinson** finds out



**F**or a lucky few, the weeks spent at home throughout a succession of lockdowns might have meant less need for make-up, little exposure to pollution, and likely subsequent improvements in skin texture and tone. But for a rising number of women the pandemic seems to have triggered a minor complexion crisis.

Unrelenting stress, lack of fresh air and sunlight, poor sleep, screen-staring, mask-wearing and all-day snacking can wreak havoc on the skin, and this is a problem more likely to affect women in middle age, according to consultant dermatologist Dr Emma Craythorne. 'We have seen a change in how people have been presenting with skin problems recently,' she says, 'with a distinct rise in problematic eczema, psoriasis, acne and rashes.' So what's going on – and how can we rectify it?

## POOR SLEEP

Just one bad night's sleep can leave your skin looking dull and puffy, but prolonged sleep deprivation disrupts the body's natural process of skin repair and can cause premature ageing. That's bad news for the rising number of people whose sleep has been affected by the pandemic. A recent study by Southampton University showed a sharp increase in anxiety-related sleep problems in the last year, with poor sleep now affecting one in four people (up from one in six, pre-pandemic).

'Having a longer duration of poor sleep is associated with signs of premature ageing (fine lines, reduced elasticity, pigmentation changes), lack of hydration, larger pores,

textural changes, and changes in blood flow to the skin,' warns consultant dermatologist Dr Alia Ahmed. But luckily, taking steps to improve your sleep (developing a calming night-time routine, ensuring your bedroom is silent, dark, warm and comfortable) will help.

## SCREEN FACE

Screen time for adults has increased by a third in the last year, with most of us now spending 40% of our waking hours staring at a screen (according to research by media regulator Ofcom). Dr Craythorne warns that back-to-back online meetings can be problematic for some women, who find hours spent staring at their reflection triggers concerns about sagging jowls, frown lines or double chins, which they might not have previously noticed – and certainly won't have been bothered about – before.

Worse, there is concern that computers and screens could emit high-energy visible light, which can accelerate ageing. New research suggests that spending five days in front of a computer can have the same impact on skin as spending 25 minutes in the midday sun without any protection, because it is thought to increase inflammation and pigmentation.

Dr Craythorne says the impact is low compared to UV damage from the sun, but recommends wearing an SPF cream indoors, preferably one which shields against blue light, which ►

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may trigger activity in the cells that can generate the free radicals associated with accelerated ageing.

### SUGAR AND ALCOHOL

Prolonged periods spent at home can mean easy access to the biscuit tin, and many of us have found comfort in sweet treats and a 'made it through the day' glass of wine or 'quarantini' to compensate for a lacklustre social life. But the sugars in highly processed carbohydrates, chocolate and alcohol can accelerate skin ageing through a process called glycation.

Dr Saira Vasdev, who trained in intensive care but now practises in the field of aesthetic medicine, explains: 'Glycation is a chemical reaction that occurs when excess sugar molecules bind to our healthy collagen and elastin fibres of the skin, causing them to become stiff, fragmented and dysfunctional.' Damage can cause an increase in wrinkles, sagging and a loss of radiance. Too much sugar can also aggravate inflammatory skin conditions such as rosacea, eczema, psoriasis and acne, and alcohol is dehydrating, which means it can cause dry skin that makes fine lines and pores more apparent. Increasing your intake of fresh fruit and vegetables, and a brief booze ban, should help reset your skin balance.

### BEHIND THE MASK

Maskne (mask-related acne, caused by your facial covering 'trapping' dirt and oil in pores) has always been an accepted phenomenon in the medical profession, as a result of wearing face coverings for prolonged periods on a daily basis. But now the problem has spread to the rest of us.

Dr Ophelia Veraitch, who is a consultant dermatologist at the London Cranley Clinic, says: 'Acne related to mask wearing is the most common skin problem I'm seeing right now. It happens because physically covering the skin creates a warm, moist environment for sensitive facial skin.'

Dr Craythorne says she is also seeing an increasing number of cases of a condition called perioral dermatitis, which shows up as small bumps and blisters around the nose and mouth. 'This is caused by changes to the microbiome on the skin. Normally microscopic colonies of bacteria and fungus live in harmony on our skin, but mask wearing changes that delicate balance.'

She also warns that mask wearing can cause a flare-up in rosacea (an inflammatory skin condition that is most

## FIVE KEY STEPS TO CLEAR SKIN

- 1 If you wear a face covering regularly, switch to a gentle fragrance-free cleanser and a lighter moisturiser to reduce the possibility of irritation.
- 2 Wear a daily SPF indoors to protect your skin against the blue light from screens (Dr Craythorne recommends finding tinted versions, which contain iron oxides).
- 3 Get outside as often as possible and exercise regularly to reduce anxiety levels and boost circulation.
- 4 Take time out for yourself and engage in some form of meditation or mindfulness to help combat stress.
- 5 Aim to get a good night's sleep, every night.

likely to appear in mid-life) and recommends switching to a silk mask ('it's less likely to rub and irritate the skin') and using a less oily – and fragrance-free – daily moisturiser.

### THE STRESS EFFECT

There is no doubt that elevated stress levels triggered by the pandemic have exacerbated skin problems, and dermatologists are increasingly recommending stress-busting techniques such as mindfulness as part of their treatment plan.

Dr Ahmed says: 'Most people do not fully appreciate the impact of psychological health on skin.' She explains: 'The brain has a stress-activated pathway that causes the release of chemicals and hormones that drive inflammation both in the body and the skin. The stress hormone cortisol can affect the immune system and make the skin less able to defend itself. This can drive allergic responses, delay healing and disrupt the skin's natural barrier.'

This disruption can make the skin feel dry, scaly and itchy, or it could trigger the formation of lines, wrinkles, deepen pigmentation, or just produce a dull-looking complexion.

'Many patients I see now are experiencing high levels of stress, and people with skin conditions are at higher risk of developing poor psychological health, meaning they are more likely to feel embarrassed, low, anxious, have body image issues or feel socially isolated. These feelings can then impact their skin and it can turn into a vicious cycle,' adds Dr Ahmed.

She specialises in a new medical specialism called psychodermatology, which aims to give people the tools to think differently about their skin.

'Psychodermatology deals with skin conditions that are caused or made worse by feelings of stress – eczema, psoriasis, rosacea – as well as those skin problems that may have a psychiatric origin.'

Alongside medication and targeted skincare, she prescribes relaxation therapies, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioural therapies (such as habit reversal therapy to break the itch-scratch cycle). 'The idea of "healthy mind, healthy body" can be extended to include the skin,' she says. 'As people are more interested in their own bodies and the effect that their mind is having on their health, it is only natural that the most visible organ – the skin – should get more focus.' ■

