



It's not a myth -- [stress](#) can wreak havoc on your [skin](#). At blame: a bittersweet, little hormone called cortisol. Small increases of [cortisol](#) in the body can be a good thing -- giving us a quick burst of energy during a 'fight or flight' response -- but, like cookies or deadlines, too much can quickly turn bad.

When we're stressed, cortisol levels tend to remain high for an extended period of time -- days, weeks, months -- which ultimately causes inflammation in the skin, says Dr. Amy Wechsler, M.D., New York dermatologist and psychiatrist and author of "[The Mind-Beauty Connection: 9 Days to Less Stress, Gorgeous Skin, and a Whole New You](#)." In turn, that inflammation can cause breakouts, dryness, sensitive skin -- even [wrinkles](#), says Wechsler.

"If someone is stressed out, they may have a stomach ache or an [ulcer](#) and it's terrible for the individual, but they don't have to deal with how the world is seeing it. If you're breaking out, or if your skin is dry and irritated and red and puffy, then you have to deal with how it looks to you and how other people are perceiving you," says Wechsler. "That adds to the stress."

The good news is these changes in your skin don't have to be permanent -- you can easily address them. But you also have to reduce the stress, says Wechsler. "It's hard to treat the skin effectively if the stress is still going on at such a high level."

Here are five ways to help reduce the signs of stress on your skin:

1. Stick to your skincare routine -- and use the right products for your problems

No matter how late you're at the office, don't skip out on washing and moisturizing your face before bed, says Wechsler. Using the right products can make a difference in your skin if it's acting up. Here's some guidance:

If you're breaking out: "Inflammation in a sebaceous gland causes more sebum and oil to be produced so that will clog more follicles and cause more [pimples](#)," says Wechsler. Start by dabbing on a spot treatment that contains two-percent salicylic acid and consider switching to a cleanser with benzoyl peroxide (you can find both in the skincare aisle of the drugstore). [Benzoyl peroxide](#), which is antibacterial and anti-inflammatory, can be more drying and more irritating than salicylic acid, so Wechsler recommends using a face wash that contains five percent or less (for the body, a wash with up to ten percent is okay).

Remember: more is not better here. Ease these products into your routine by using them once a day -- adding too many acne-fighting ingredients at once can over-dry skin causing it to become even more inflamed and more broken out.

If your skin is dry or itchy: When you're stressed, the skin's natural barrier that seals in moisture becomes weakened, so water evaporates more quickly and leaves skin drier, says Wechsler. If you're not moisturizing, start doing so once a day after you wash your face; if you're moisturizing once a day, bump it up to twice. Wechsler suggests creams and lotions that contain a humectant like [glycerin or hyaluronic acid](#), which attract water and hold it in the skin. If you're dry and acne-prone, look for a lotion marked oil-free or non-comedogenic. The skin on the body can handle richer ingredients like shea butter.

If your skin is sensitive: Nonstop stress can also make skin sensitive. To calm irritated skin, switch to a fragrance-free, hypoallergenic cleanser and moisturizer, says Wechsler. Be sure to read the ingredient lists on both and if fragrance is listed at all -- even if it's the very last item on the list -- it can be a problem for some people, says Wechsler. The sorbic acid in retinoid creams can also be irritating, so avoid using these until your skin is back to normal, too.

If you're seeing lines and wrinkles: "Dry skin is wrinkly," says Wechsler. So begin by following the advice above for dryness. Using a cream or lotion with a topical antioxidant like [green tea](#) can also help prevent wrinkles by reducing oxidative stress to the skin.

For all of the above: "Once you figure out what works, keep these products on hand," says Wechsler. That way, if it happens again, you know you'll have something to remedy the problem.

2. Wear sunscreen

"The sun causes oxidative stress to the surface of the skin, which actually promotes inflammation, making you break out more, have more wrinkles and making your skin drier," says Wechsler. Look for [sunscreens](#) that have broad-spectrum protection (they guard against UVA and UVB rays), contain at least nine percent zinc oxide or titanium dioxide and have an SPF of 30 or higher.

3. Limit carbs and sugar

While that's exactly what a lot of people reach for when they're stressed, try to fight it. Research shows that if you're eating mostly carbs and sugar, your cortisol levels are higher, says Wechsler. A [balanced diet](#) of lean proteins, vegetables, and fruits can help give your body nutrients it needs to tame inflammation.

4. Practice good sleep habits

Stress and [lack of sleep](#) tend to go hand in hand: When sleep is scarce, your cortisol levels don't drop as much as they're supposed to at night, says Wechsler. Just like you practice skin hygiene before bed -- washing and [moisturizing](#) your face -- you have to prepare your brain to go to bed to encourage quality rest. That means: avoiding caffeine after 5 p.m.; eating dinner two to three hours before bed (digesting a heavy meal can keep you awake); dimming the lights and turning off your Blackberry, computer and television an hour before bed (light and stimulating TV signals your brain to stay alert). Instead, thirty minutes before you tuck-in, drink something soothing like chamomile tea or warm milk, take a warm bath or read a book. And, "try to get eight hours," says Wechsler.

5. Make an appointment with yourself -- then a friend

Schedule a manicure or a massage or a pedicure. "It's not frivolous and it's not indulgent," says Wechsler. "It's actually good for you -- the act of spending a little time and energy on yourself." Meeting a friend for coffee or to visit (or vent) is also worth your time. "Studies show that women especially, if they hang out with a friend in person, it actually lowers your cortisol levels," says Wechsler.