

Skin Problems & Treatments Health Center

Oily Skin: Solutions That Work -- No Matter What Your Age

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WebMD Feature

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Although most folks associate oily skin with the teen years, age is only part of the story.

Indeed, while problems don't usually begin until around puberty, for many people, oily skin persists long after the senior prom has faded into memory. For some, oily skin can last a lifetime.

"If you have oily skin, you have oily skin – it's just something that happens to some people," says Joel Schlessinger, MD president-elect of the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery and director of [LovelySkin.com](#) in Omaha, Nebraska.

While heredity can play a role – if your mother or father had oily skin you might as well – so do hormones.

"Oil production is stimulated by hormone production - so anything that causes hormones to fluctuate can cause skin to become more oily," says dermatologist Doris J. Day, MD, associate professor, NYU School of Medicine in New York City.

For women, hormone changes occur not only during puberty, but at the start of each menstrual cycle, and during pregnancy and perimenopause. For both women and men, oily skin can be stimulated by any physical or emotional situation that puts hormones in a tailspin.

The good news: Regardless of cause(s) of your oily skin, there are steps you can take to control it

WebMD talked to 4 top dermatologists to gather the low-down on what works and what doesn't to keep oily skin looking great. From proper cleansing techniques and oil-targeted skin care, to treatments aimed at reducing oil production, you can replace that oily shine with a healthy glow -- in less time than you think.

Taking Care of Oily Skin: Where To Start

Regardless of your age, oil - also known as sebum – is always produced by the sebaceous glands.

Located deep within the second layer or "dermis" of the skin, these glands are most plentiful in the face, neck, chest, head and back – one reason that these areas appear to be affected by oil production the most.

To get from the glands to your skin, the oils flow into nearby follicular pores, and eventually works its way to the surface. Here it plays a vital role in the health of both skin and hair.

"It helps seal moisture in, which gives hair that healthy sheen and helps keep skin plump and hydrated," says Charles E. Crutchfield III, M.D., Clinical Associate Professor of Dermatology, University of Minnesota Medical School Medical and Director, Crutchfield Dermatology.

But in some folks too much oil is produced. Skin and hair no longer look healthy, but instead, greasy, slick and even dirty.

One way to control that is with proper cleansing. But if you think you need harsh products to scrub away the extra oil, think again. Experts say that's a big – and all too common – mistake.

"Oil production is nature's response to irritation – so the harsher the cleansing, the more likely the body is to respond by producing more oil," says Schlessinger.

Instead, treat oily skin with thorough but *gentle* cleaning.

"A good cleanser is one designed to remove excess oil while leaving intact the barrier of fatty acids to help

maintain function and protect our skin," says Barry Resnik, MD, dermatologist at Memorial Regional Hospital and Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood, Florida.

And don't be surprised if you find yourself needing two different cleansers depending on the time of the year. In fall and winter when skin is naturally drier, you'll benefit most from a super gentle cleanser. In warmer months, when perspiration can combine with sweat to make skin harder to clean, you may need a more thorough, deep cleaning product.

But what about cleansers specifically made for oily skin? According to Schlessinger, they're okay, as long as they don't cause any irritation.

"It's best to use the gentlest product you can find I actually put together a formula that uses a very low pH, which is effective at removing oil, and an amino fruit acid, which causes very little irritation," he says.

The one thing you want to avoid is soap, since most types strip the skin of all natural oils.

"That *squeaky clean* feeling people get from using soaps is derived from stripping the fatty oils from your skin and is more harmful than good," Resnik cautions.

In addition, both experts say you should never over-wash oily skin, even if your cleanser is gentle. Indeed, unless you've been mining coal or digging in the dirt, twice a day is usually enough.

Clay or mud masques can also help. Although there are no medical studies to prove that they work, many beauty experts say that these treatments can temporarily pull oil from the pores and soak it up, leaving oily skin looking fresher for several hours afterwards.

Taking Care of Oily Skin: What Works

Because an oily complexion often feels moist to the touch, many people avoid using moisturizers, because they think they will only make matters worse.

Experts disagree. Crutchfield tells WebMD that oil and moisture *are not* the same things, and the older you are, the more you need to use a moisturizer even when skin is oily.

"The oiliness of your skin will seal in the moisture you have - but won't replace the moisture that you lose, particularly as you age, " says Crutchfield.

For even better results, try incorporating alpha hydroxy acid (AHAs) creams into your daily skin care regimen.

"There is some evidence that AHA creams increase production of collagen and hyaluronic acid which in turn helps in relation to moisture – plus they treat superficial lines and wrinkles so you also get a rejuvenating effect," says Crutchfield.

Resnik recommends using a glycolic acid or salicylic acid product coupled with a light oil-free moisturizer containing a sunscreen for best results.

"This will do a good job of gently exfoliating your skin, reducing sebum buildup and giving you a more youthful appearance," he says.

Taking Care of Oily Skin: When Nothing Else Works

If, despite your best efforts to control oil production, your skin is still gushing 24/7, there are specific treatments that can help.

Among the easiest are over-the-counter drying solutions. While they won't impact oil production, they can 'mop up' some of what is being produced so oily skin looks better.

"You can choose any topical treatment that has alcohol in it – I like solutions more than lotions, which dry the surface area of the skin," says Crutchfield.

Schlessinger says that astringents and toners can also help – although the results are temporary, so application may have to be repeated more than once a day.

Resnik suggests using oil-inhibiting products. "I recommend OC 8, which uses an absorbent technology to reduce shine and it's very effective for all skin types," he says.

Cosmetic products known as "anti shine" primers can also help by forming a layer between skin and make-up that works to absorb excess oil as it's being secreted.

If temporary measures like these don't work to control your oily skin, there are also several professional treatments that can help. These include prescription topical and oral drugs like Retin A, Differin, Tazorac or Accutane.

"Accutane works the longest and has both immediate and long-term results – the others can temporarily improve the situation, but aren't long-term solutions," says Schlessinger. While some doctors use this medication to treat oily skin, its use for this purpose is off-label and not generally recommended.

Resnik prefers using ultra low doses of isotretinoin. "Although it's off-label, it's extremely effective at reducing or eliminating excess oil," he says. The dosage is limited to about 10 mg once or twice a week.

Crutchfield says topical Retin A products can also help by reducing the amount of oil on the surface of skin.

One very new remedy for oily skin uses topical preparations containing the B vitamin niacinamide. Early studies have found that these preparations reduce oil production, but the results have been modest to date.

In still another study, a group of Japanese researchers found that topically applied spironolactone (the oral version is available in this country and is used to treat high blood pressure) was also found to reduce the rate of oil production in young women. This product is not available in the United States, however.

If you still feel you need more help, Crutchfield says laser treatments may be what the doctor orders.

Although oily skin will remain oily throughout your life, as you age, production does decrease. So, the older you are, the fewer treatments of any kind you will need.

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SOURCES: *Joel Schlessinger*, MD, president-elect, American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Esthetic Surgery. *Doris J. Day*, MD, associated professor, NYU School of Medicine, New York City. *Charles E. Crutchfield III*, MD, clinical associate professor of dermatology, University of Minnesota Medical School Medical; director, Crutchfield Dermatology. *Barry Resnik*, MD, dermatologist, Memorial Regional Hospital and Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, Hollywood, Fla. American Academy of Dermatology: "Oil Washed Up." *Draelos, Z. Cutis*, July 2006; vol 78(1 Suppl): pp 34-40; *Draelos, Z. Journal of Cosmetic Laser Therapy*, June 2006; vol 8(2): pp 96-101. *Yamamoto, A. Journal of Dermatology*, April 1996; vol 23(4): pp 243-246. *Bouchez, C. Your Perfectly Pampered Menopause; Health, Beauty and Lifestyle Advice for The Best Years of Your Life*, Broadway Books, 2005.

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