



What it feels like *to have* BAD SKIN

If you suffer with acne, the scars run much deeper than you think. *Cosmo* Beauty Editor **Kate Turner** shares her story and the latest research on how to get the skin of your dreams

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aving acne as a teenager was one of the most emotionally shattering things I've ever gone through. It was so UNFAIR. I was eating the same foods as my friends, living the same life – why was their skin so great and mine so AWFUL?

It began as a handful of teenage spots when I was 13, but quickly escalated – my skin turned an angry red and it felt as if every pore was a zit-in-waiting. People started offering advice, even if I didn't ask for it – usually those with flawless skin who assumed I must be doing something wrong. Had I tried acupuncture? Allergy testing? Giving up chocolate? Er, yes, I'd tried it all, thanks. One Christmas I was even given spot cream by a family friend – beautifully wrapped up under the tree.

When my skin was really awful, at about 14, my dad took me to the doctor, saying, "I had spots as a teenager too, but nothing as bad as this." I guess he was just sharing his concern, but the words destroyed me. Even my dad thought I was some kind of freak. The doctor put me on antibiotics and a harsh lotion that made my skin sting. The spots remained. I cried.

When you've got bad skin, the world is full of hazards. I dreaded sleepovers at school because my friends would get to see me without my makeup on. At least

we watched movies with the lights out. I'd get up before everyone else and sneak into the bathroom to reapply Rimmel cover-up. Festivals were out – there was no way I could face three days without makeup. Even hairstyles were pretty limiting. A ponytail felt like putting my skin on the front line.

There's a particular cruelty in that acne tends to appear just as you're working out your place in the world. "Acne affects about 80% of young people aged 11-30 and can have a major impact on sufferers," says Dr Stephen Kownacki of the Acne Academy. "It's now considered the most common skin disease in Western society," says dermatologist Dr Sam Bunting. "Women are four times as likely as men to suffer from severe forms of the disease."

Frustratingly, acne has a huge variety of causes, with genetics, lifestyle and hormones all playing a role.

'When you've got bad skin, the world is full of hazards'

"Much of the variation in acne severity is due to differences in immune systems, with some people having a greater inflammatory response to excess oil," explains cosmetic dermatologist Dr Rachael

Eckel. Acne can flare due to hormone fluctuations (hello, puberty) or medication (eg, going on/coming off the Pill). "Stress plays a major part," adds dermatologist Dr Stefanie Williams. "It releases inflammatory stress hormone cortisol, causing an overproduction of sebum and inflammation."

But how to reduce stress when your skin is sabotaging every social occasion? If I got chubby, I knew how to lose weight. If I hated my hair, I could dye it. My skin? It had a mind of its own. "The lack of control is one of the toughest aspects of acne," says psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos. "We live in a visual world. Subconsciously, clear skin is associated with fertility, health and hygiene – distressing if you have acne."

Looking back, I was lucky I had only mild acne. I had the love and support of

New skin-saving heroes

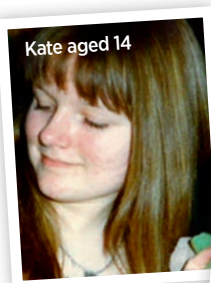
Clinique Sonic System Purifying Cleansing Brush, £79 Superb for removing deep-down dirt and pollution

Sarah Chapman Skinesis Spot Stickers, £19 (for 16) Invisible patches to fast-forward spot healing

Cover FX BB Gel, £35 The perfect makeup/skincare hybrid for the best-looking skin

Tria Acne Clearing Blue Light, £229 A gently effective hand-held device to destroy acne bacteria

Remescar Silicone Scar Stick, £19.99 Apply under makeup to help heal even old scars



my family and I wasn't short of good times or good friends. Things radically changed when I was prescribed Dianette, a contraceptive pill that can help with acne, at the age of 20. I started working out (exercise is a great hormone leveller) and eating better. My skin improved within weeks and my confidence with it.

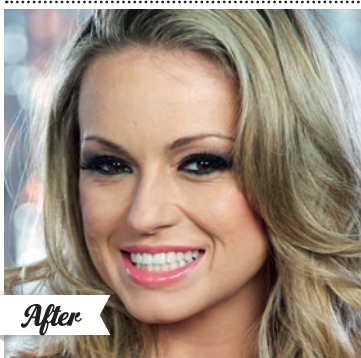
I never got a decent answer as to why my skin was so awful, but I have my

"I WOULD LOOK AT THE FLOOR AS MY SKIN WAS SO BAD"

Ola Jordan, 31, dancer from Strictly Come Dancing



Before



After

"My skin deteriorated rapidly when I was 22. I was always changing my diet and skincare but nothing seemed to help. I wore makeup everywhere, even to the gym, and would pull my hair in front of my face and look down at the floor to try to hide my skin. It was very difficult being on TV where there's massive pressure to look your 100% best. Luckily, I've been with James (my husband) for a long time so he was very supportive, but it did affect my self-esteem. For me, the breakthrough was using Proactiv products (Proactiv.co.uk), which finally helped clear my blemishes. I've still got a few scars but I feel in control and my skin is lovely now. I've got my confidence back."

suspicions. Acne is commonly thought of as a 'Western' disease, and research has pointed the finger at our diet rich in sugar, dairy and processed foods. Growing up, I'd have endless cups of sugary tea and stodgy food was a staple in our house. I was, unwittingly, a sugar fiend, and my particular genetic make-up reacted angrily.

Medical advice is now, in my view, much more rounded than when I first visited my doctor. At the time, Roaccutane, considered the best medication for acne, was shrouded in bad press linked to extreme side effects and depression – I was scared to go near it.

"Roaccutane is a very good treatment that can switch off acne for good," says Dr Williams. "These days we prescribe it in lower doses, which is extremely well tolerated and can even improve patients' mood!" I wish I'd had access to this 'baby dose' and saved myself years of misery. [Please note Roaccutane is a powerful drug that

needs supervision by a dermatologist and can have serious side effects.]

Now in my thirties, my skin's pretty good but the pores on my nose and cheeks remain open from the bad years. With my carefully applied makeup you'd never know I suffered from acne. Just don't expect me to sign up to the 'freshly scrubbed, bare skin' beauty trend that's all over the catwalks.

For the multitude of reasons we get acne, there are as many solutions.

It's up to you to try one at a time and find that sweet spot where you can keep your skin clear without taking all the fun out of life. For me, that means minimising carbs and

dairy, using retinol-based products and wearing mineral makeup. Finally, don't hesitate to see a dermatologist – acne is not something to be endured. "Beautiful skin is a real possibility, even if you've struggled for years, provided you get good advice," says Dr Bunting. Your GP can refer you to a dermatologist or search Bad.org.uk.

'Research has pointed the finger at our Western diet'

YOUR *clear skin* REGIME

Cleanse



Gentle but thorough cleansing is your aim. Use a gentle foaming cleanser like Murad Daily Cleansing Foam, £28, or Bioderma Sébium Purifying Cleansing Foaming Gel, £9, twice a day to dissolve sebum, pollution and impurities.

Protect



You need two key elements in the daytime: sunscreen and antioxidants. This doesn't have to mean moisturiser – serums are often better tolerated by oily skin. Try Ole Henriksen Truth Serum Collagen Booster, £30. Look for non-comedogenic sunscreen; the newer formulas are light and non-greasy. I love Heliocare SPF50 Gel, £20, or a swirl of BareMinerals SPF30 Natural Sunscreen, £25.

Treat



"Vitamin A (retinol) has countless benefits – reduced acne and scarring, sebum control, smaller pores," says Dr Eckel. Ask for a retinoic acid prescription cream, such as Retamax. For milder acne, try Skinceuticals Retinol 0.5, £48. Benzoyl peroxide sorts sebum – ask your GP for Duac gel. Or La Roche-Posay Effaclar 3-Step Anti-Blemish System, £32.95, promises results after six weeks. ➤



Before



After

“SEEING A DERMATOLOGIST CHANGED MY LIFE”

Jessica Clarke, 28, editorial director

“I started getting stubborn spots when I moved to London in my early twenties. I saw a photo of myself and couldn’t believe my skin had got so bad. I kept busy and assumed it would clear up, but it didn’t. Pretty soon it became an obsession; I’d look at every girl on the street to see if her skin was better or worse than mine. Eventually I went to see dermatologist Dr Sam Bunting, who prescribed antibiotics with a retinol-based skincare regime and I was totally clear of acne within six months.”

How to survive WHEN YOU HATE THE SKIN YOU’RE IN

Top tips from Cosmo’s psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos

Commit to daily stress-busting activities, whether it’s doing yoga, seeing friends or laughing your head off at a funny movie.

Don’t let your bad skin dictate your life. Flirt, go shopping, have fun at parties – don’t hide away or stop living!

Have a response prepared when people comment on it, such as, ‘It happens when I’m stressed.’ Make eye contact, and act as if you are fine with it.

“I CURED MY ACNE BY CHANGING MY LIFESTYLE”

Tracy Raftl, 27, blogger

“I developed severe acne when I was 23 and felt like no one would ever find me attractive. I wanted to clear my skin naturally, without drugs. I eliminated most processed foods, dairy and sugary things. I added supplements – good-quality probiotics as well as omega-3s and

vitamin A. I stopped using products and washed my face with raw honey and moisturised with organic jojoba oil. I was totally clear of severe acne within three months and now I help people with their acne through my blog, TheLoveVitamin.com.”



Before



After

What to eat for clear skin

THINK ANTI-INFLAMMATORY

Lots of fish, fruit, vegetables, eggs, oils and minimal sugar. “My top anti-acne foods are oily fish three times a week, and zinc-rich foods such as beans and seeds,” says pharmacist Shabir Daya.

HOLD THE DAIRY

There are conflicting studies, but most experts I spoke to think dairy aggravates

acne, so if you can avoid it, why not? “I don’t favour extremes, but have one flat white rather than five lattes,” says Dr Bunting.

GO EASY ON THE SUGAR

Sugary foods cause a spike in blood insulin that leads to increased sebum, clogged pores and pigmentation. “Refined carbohydrates such as bread, white pasta and rice are also quickly

broken down into sugar,” says Dr Eckel. Swap traditional carbs for sweet potato mash and cauliflower ‘rice’ instead.

SUPPLEMENTS

One study found omega-3 supplements taken daily reduce acne by 40-50%. Shabir also recommends Viridian Clear Skin Complex, £22.06, “to regulate oil, purify the bloodstream and reduce bacteria”. ♦

For further help visit Acneacademy.org