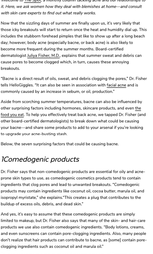

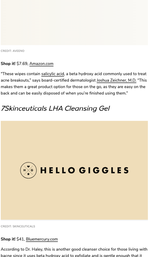

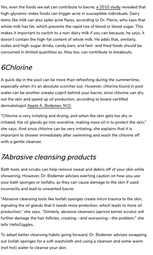

The 7 surprising reasons we get bacne—and expert-recommended ways to treat it

Courtney Leiva | Updated Jun 12, 2020 @ 2:36 pm

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CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

Welcome to The Spot, a monthly column tackling acne and our relationships to it. Here, we ask women how they deal with blemishes at home—and consult with skin care experts to find out what really works.

Now that the sizzling days of summer are finally upon us, it's very likely that those icky breakouts will start to return once the heat and humidity dial up. This includes the stubborn forehead pimples that like to show up after a long beach day; however, body acne (especially bacne, or back acne) is also likely to become more frequent during the summer months. Board-certified dermatologist Juliya Fisher, M.D., explains that summer sweat and debris can cause pores to become clogged which, in turn, causes these annoying breakouts.

"Bacne is a direct result of oils, sweat, and debris clogging the pores," Dr. Fisher tells HelloGiggles. "It can also be seen in association with facial acne and is commonly caused by an increase in sebum, or oil, production."

Aside from scorching summer temperatures, bacne can also be influenced by other surprising factors including hormones, skincare products, and even the food you eat. To help you effectively treat back acne, we tapped Dr. Fisher (and other board-certified dermatologists) to break down what could be causing your bacne—and share some products to add to your arsenal if you're looking to upgrade your acne-busting stash.

Below, the seven surprising factors that could be causing bacne.

1Comedogenic products

Dr. Fisher says that non-comedogenic products are essential for oily and acne-prone skin types to use, as comedogenic cosmetics products tend to contain ingredients that clog pores and lead to unwanted breakouts. "Comedogenic products may contain ingredients like coconut oil, cocoa butter, marula oil, and isopropyl myristate," she explains."This creates a plug that contributes to the buildup of excess oils, debris, and dead skin."

And yes, it's easy to assume that these comedogenic products are simply limited to makeup, but Dr. Fisher also says that many of the skin- and hair-care products we use also contain comedogenic ingredients. "Body lotions, creams, and even sunscreens can contain pore-clogging ingredients. Also, many people don't realize that hair products can contribute to bacne, as [some] contain pore-clogging ingredients such as coconut oil and marula oil."

To keep back acne to a minimum, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) advises selecting makeup, sunscreen, and skin- and hair-care products that are labeled non-comedogenic. These products are typically oil-free.

2Exercise

Of course, there's no denying that summertime allows more opportunities for you to work out outdoors and get out of the gym. However, that same morning run can also bring breakouts into the fold, as Dr. Fisher explains that once moisture and occlusion are combined with friction, blocked pores and irritation can surely follow.

"When you don't shower after exercising, toxins released from the pores sit on the skin and cause irritation, or plugging of the pores," she says. "Add some friction from skin rubbing against [the] material, gear, or another body part, and this results in inflammatory acne."

If your bacne is a result of sweating from physical activity, Dr. Fisher advises changing out of gym clothes right after working out and washing the oils and sweat off of the skin so that it doesn't linger. Also, use workout clothing that's designed to help wick away moisture, since that can also be helpful.

3Stress

Aside from taking a toll on our physical and mental health, stress levels also play a significant role in our skin's health. In fact, the AAD suggests that our body produces more androgen hormones during times of strife; this can lead to the production of breakouts on your face, chest, and back, according to board-certified dermatologist Susan Massick, M.D. Additionally, she explains that people can experience stress-related hair loss, rashes, and itching, and in the case of acne, stress can cause increased androgen production in both men and women, which can lead to acne flares.

To minimize stress, Dr. Massick recommends practicing stress-relieving techniques (exercise, deep breathing, etc.) that will help with overall health and wellness with the added benefit of helping relieve stress-induced acne.

4Hormones and genetics

Yep, hormones can also be another secret culprit behind your bacne breakouts. Board-certified dermatologist Marie Hayag, M.D., explains that higher hormone levels can become synonymous with back breakouts. "Hormones, such as higher levels in testosterone or falling levels of estrogen, can contribute to bacne," she says. "Much like teenage acne, adult acne often has a hormonal basis, which is why it is especially common in women during menstruation, pregnancy, and even menopause."

Like hormones, genetics can also play a big part in bacne, and board-certified dermatologist Peterson Pierre, M.D. confirms that a family history of bad acne can up your chances of having breakouts: "If there is a history of bad acne in your family, although not a given, chances are high that you will experience acne at some point in your life."

5High-fat and processed foods

Yes, even the foods we eat can contribute to bacne; a 2010 study revealed that high-glycemic-index foods can trigger acne in susceptible individuals. Dairy items like milk can also spike acne flares, according to Dr. Pierre, who says that whole milk has fat, which prevents the rapid rise of blood or blood sugar. This makes it important to switch to a non-dairy milk if you can because, he says, it doesn't contain the high-fat content of whole milk. He adds that, similarly, sodas and high-sugar drinks, candy bars, and fast- and fried foods should be consumed in limited quantities as, they too, can contribute to breakouts.

6Chlorine

A quick dip in the pool can be more than refreshing during the summertime, especially when it's an absolute scorcher out. However, chlorine found in pool water can be another sneaky culprit behind your bacne, since chlorine can dry out the skin and speed up oil production, according to board-certified dermatologist Apple A. Bodemer, M.D.

"Chlorine is very irritating and drying, and when the skin gets too dry or irritated, the oil glands go into overdrive, making more oil in to protect the skin," she says. And since chlorine can be very irritating, she explains that it is important to shower immediately after swimming and wash the chlorine off with a gentle cleanser.

7Abrasive cleansing products

Bath tools and scrubs can help remove sweat and debris off of your skin while showering. However, Dr. Bodemer advises exerting caution on how you use your bath sponges or loofahs, as they can cause damage to the skin if used incorrectly and lead to unwanted bacne.

"Abrasive cleansing tools like loofah sponges create micro trauma to the skin, signaling the oil glands that it needs more protection, which leads to more oil production," she says. "Similarly, abrasive cleansers (apricot kernel scrubs) will further damage the hair follicles, creating—and worsening—the problem," she tells HelloGiggles.

To adopt better cleansing habits going forward, Dr. Bodemer advises swapping out loofah sponges for a soft washcloth and using a cleanser and some warm (not hot) water to cleanse your skin.

Best skincare products for treating bacne:

1Paula's Choice Skin Perfect 2% BHA Liquid Exfoliant

CREDIT: PAULA'S CHOICE

Shop it! $10, Nordstrom.com

Aside from boasting a reasonable price tag, this liquid exfoliant can be easily applied onto a cotton pad and then directly applied onto the skin, according to Dr. Haley. Similarly, the added beta hydroxy acid inside this product helps exfoliate and calm skin, allowing you to use it directly after cleansing and toning, as she suggests. Take our word for it: This liquid exfoliant can even render results overnight.

2Neutrogena Body Clear Acne Body Wash

CREDIT: NEUTROGENA

Shop it! $9.49, Ulta Beauty

Cleansing your back should be the last step in your shower routine, according to board-certified dermatologist Gabriel Zenovia, M.D., as you'll want to remove any shampoo and conditioner lingering on your back. That's why Dr. Zenovia recommends using this body wash, which contains two percent salicylic acid, to prevent back breakouts from wreaking havoc on your skin.

3Replenix Acne Solutions Gly/Sal 10-2 Acne Body Spray

CREDIT: REPLENIX

Shop it! $32, Amazon.com

Unless you have a back-scrubbing sponge, applying some cleanser onto your back can be a difficult task. This makes it a good idea to invest in a body spray that can stand tall against breakouts, according to board-certified dermatologist Jennifer Haley, M.D.—especially if you need to clean hard-to-reach areas. "This spray can be used on skin after hot yoga or exercise, especially when you can't immediately get to a shower," she tells HelloGiggles. "It also has both alpha and beta hydroxy acids, which promote exfoliation."

4Yuni Shower Sheets Large Body Wipes

CREDIT: YUNI

Shop it! $15, Sephora.com

If you aren't a fan of sprayable skincare, Dr. Hayag recommends investing in body wipes: They too, remove acne-causing sweat and dirt. "This product is a great measure to take between a workout and a shower, as it removes sweat and oil from the back to reduce chances of breakouts," she explains. Additionally, it's a 2020 Beauty Crush Award winner, so you know it's good.

5SkinMedica AHA/BHA Exfoliating Cleanser

CREDIT: SKINMEDICA

Shop it! $47, Amazon.com

Dr. Haley says this cleanser promotes physical and chemical exfoliation of clogged pores, thanks to its alpha hydroxy and beta hydroxy acids.

6Aveeno Clear Complexion Daily Facial Cleansing Pads

CREDIT: AVEENO

Shop it! $7.69, Amazon.com

"These wipes contain salicylic acid, a beta hydroxy acid commonly used to treat acne breakouts," says board-certified dermatologist Joshua Zeichner, M.D. "This makes them a great product option for those on the go, as they are easy on the back and can be easily disposed of when you're finished using them."

7Skinceuticals LHA Cleansing Gel

CREDIT: SKINCEUTICALS

Shop it! $41, Bluemercury.com

According to Dr. Haley, this is another good cleanser choice for those living with bacne since it uses beta hydroxy acid to exfoliate and is gentle enough that it doesn't cause inflammation.

8EltaMD UV Aero Full-Body Sunscreen Broad Spectrum SPF 45 Spray

CREDIT: ELTA MD

Shop it! $33, Amazon.com

If you are looking for a good sunscreen recommendation this summer, board-certified dermatologist Todd Minars, M.D., suggests using this sprayable sunscreen that can provide coverage to hard-to-reach areas like your back. Plus, if you are looking for non-comedogenic products, he adds that this product fits nicely within those guidelines since it's made without heavy, pore-clogging ingredients. "This sunscreen is oil-free, mineral-based, and does not contain fragrances, colors, or parabens, which are not advised for those with sensitive skin or common flare-ups," Dr. Minars says.