

Take charge of your health
Prevention

LOOK FABULOUS AFTER 40!

Dermatologist-tested solutions, breakthrough treatments, and the latest science, to keep your complexion blemish-free and beautiful

■ BY ELIZABETH PASSARELLO AND KAVITA DEVGAN



It's a cruel irony that more than half of adult women are battling breakouts at the same time they're coping with crow's feet. The culprit is hormones, which ebb and flow throughout a woman's life, rather than stabilise as they do, in men. "As a woman gets older the imbalance in the androgen-estrogen ratio increases proneness to acne directly," says Dr Shehla Agarwal, a Delhi-based dermatologist. "As estrogen levels fluctuate—or in the case of menopause, decrease—androgens, the hormones that stimulate oil glands, can lead to breakouts," adds Jonette E Keri, MD, PhD, an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Miami School of Medicine.

Also to blame: stress, which raises hormone levels. One thing you needn't stress about is controlling the condition. New remedies make it easier to get the clear skin you've always wanted—and erase signs of ageing in the bargain.

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Beat blemishes at home

This skincare routine fights the main cause of acne: pores clogged by oil and cellular debris and inflammation from *P. acnes* bacteria (the causative agent of acne vulgaris or pimples). But unlike topical teenage treatments—formulated for more oily complexions—these OTC solutions are less likely to dry mature skin and make wrinkles more pronounced. The routine relies on products that address the dual concerns of acne and ageing by employing agents such as:

- **Salicylic acid** that unclogs pores and smoothes the skin by sloughing off dead cells, revealing brighter, younger skin.

- **Retinoids** such as retinol—a Vitamin A derivative that improves acne, fine lines and sun spots by normalising cellular turnover—also helps.

- **Humectants** that attract moisture (e. g. glycerine) and anti-inflammatory agents, such as green tea and allantoin, to quell inflammation.

Follow these steps to eradicate existing pimples and prevent new ones.

In the morning

- **Cleanse gently.** Use a facial wash with salicylic acid. "It gets into the pores and dislodges debris," suggests Agarwal. Some good options available in the market are Fash, Saslic and Garnier face washes. "Avoid gel cleansers (they may contain alcohol and make the skin too dry) and granulated scrubs, which strip the skin of oil, making it over-compensate and produce more. If at all, these should not be used more than once a day, adds Dr Ajita Bagai, consultant dermatologist at Delhi's Max Hospitals.

- **Treat affected areas.** If you have a blemish, dab on a spot corrector with salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide, which kills surface bacteria and dries up oil. Garnier acne pen has 2% salicylic acid and to score the benzoyl advantage use Benzac AC by Gladerma. If you're prone to breakouts in a particular area (say, your chin), apply it on the entire zone daily to help prevent them.

- **If your skin is dry, apply a moisturiser with SPF 15 or higher.** Choose one that contains an alpha-hydroxy acid such as glycolic acid. Its double benefits: the AHA exfoliates as it sloughs off dead skin cells and also moisturises the skin. "Most good moisturisers available in India have AHAs as an ingredient," says Agarwal. Look for it on the product label. "If you have an oily skin type, use an oil-free sunscreen (and preferably a gel-based one) as UV rays thicken the outer layer of the skin which can further block pores and lead to breakouts," says Bagai.

At night

- **Remove make-up with a gentle, non-medicated cleanser.** Cetaphil by Gladerma is a good option. "You can even use a cream-based face wash," suggests Agarwal. The skin can't exfoliate properly if it's not clean.

- **Apply a retinol cream.** The prescription retinoid Retin-A was approved for treating acne long before it became the gold standard for fighting wrinkles. "Retinoids help clear up and prevent all kinds of acne, from tiny bumps and blackheads to inflammatory acne and red nodules around the jaw line," says

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Agarwal. OTC retinoids like Retinol, don't pack the same punch as Rx versions, but they can be less irritating and a good way to acclimatise the skin. A good OTC option is Recova, and the prescription option is A-ret.

■ **Moisturise as needed.** Apply a moisturiser frequently to prevent dryness. "Use an oil-free lotion as it will prevent dryness and help cure acne as well," advises Agarwal.

What Your Doc Can Do

If your skin doesn't respond to at-home treatments within a few weeks, or you have many pimples (especially cyst-like nodules, which are large, painful and can cause scarring), see a dermatologist. "A doctor will prescribe a more potent retinoid and topical anti-micro-

bial such as benzoyl peroxide to kill bacteria and quell inflammation," says Agarwal. Bonus: new Rx medicines are more appropriate for ageing and dry skin. If there's not enough improvement after a few months, other drugs can be added. Also available in a dermat's anti-acne arsenal:

■ **Oral antibiotics.** A 2- to 6-month course speeds healing by targeting deeper blemishes. These drugs travel through the bloodstream, so they also fight hard-to-reach back and chest acne.

■ **Hormone therapy.** To steady hormones and deal with pre-menstrual flare-ups, patients are often put on a low-dose birth control pill. "Polycystic ovaries are a big culprit and cause acne flare-ups (along with facial hair growth)," informs Bagai. One caveat: women who are over 40 can be at increased risk of developing the same side effects associated with hormone therapy to reduce menopausal symptoms, including blood clots.

■ **Light therapy.** These treatments are used in conjunction with other Rx remedies to boost their benefits. "IPL (Intense Pulse Light Therapy) is the most commonly used therapy, which temporarily kills acne bacteria in a painless 15-minute procedure. The bacteria can return, so ongoing therapy—at Rs 500 to Rs 2000 per sitting—is necessary. If there is a resistant case of acne resulting from a hormonal gland that is getting infected with age, going for a KTP Laser (Rs 2500 per sitting) will be a better option. This laser destroys the acne effectively. "You might need 2-3 sittings at an interval of one month each," points out Agarwal. ■

