

Seeing Red

Understanding rosacea leads to finding remedies for the red face BY FIONA WRIGHT, M.D.

Rosacea is a chronic and often progressive skin disease. Nearly 14 million Americans have the condition, with most being between the ages of 30-50. The typical patient has light skin rather than dark, and women are more often affected than men.

Rosacea may begin as a tendency to flush or blush easily, and it progresses to persistent redness in the center of the face that may gradually affect the cheeks, forehead, chin and nose. There is sometimes a facial rash or redness that can be accompanied by burning or stinging. Red, pimple-like bumps may appear, and pustules erupt on the face. Rosacea is not a dangerous disease, but it can be disfiguring.

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Prominent public figures have been affected by this condition, including Bill Clinton and Princess Diana.

The persistent red color of the face comes from a network of small blood vessels (called telangiectasia) that have become enlarged and more visible in the skin. Because this disease is so visible, it can affect quality of life by making affected individuals self-conscious about their appearance. Despite major advances in our understanding of rosacea, we still can't cure this emotionally distressing condition. However, with early diagnosis and medical intervention, we can usually achieve remission of signs and symptoms, minimizing rosacea's impact on a person's quality of life.

The causes are not clear. While some studies point to the existence of a mite on the skin, the reasons for rosacea remain a mystery. Hygiene does not cause rosacea. While there is no test to determine whether a patient is suffering from rosacea, your doctor often makes the diagnosis based on the condition of the skin and the description of the symptoms from the patient.

To minimize flare-ups, it's important to identify the main trigger factors. The top three are sun exposure, emotional stress and hot weather. Others include: wind and cold weather, heavy exercise, alcohol, spicy foods, hot baths, humidity and certain skin care products.


When treating rosacea, a gentle skin care routine can help control the problem. Clean your face with mild cleansers (Cetaphil, Basis and/or NewPort), then rinse with lukewarm water and blot the face dry. Do not use a rough washcloth or a sponge. Using products with lavender and chamomile may also help calm the skin and reduce the redness.

As the sun is a strong trigger, a good non-irritating sunscreen (minimum SPF 30) used daily is very important. For those that are sensitive to chemical sunscreens, a physical sunblock (using zinc oxide and titanium oxide) may be more suitable. Makeup can also be a trigger and it is best to use a mineral makeup, which also contains zinc and titanium dioxide. The zinc alone will boost the immune system and balance your skin. (Dermacia MD SPF 30, Mineralogie SPF 26 and/or Bare Minerals SPF 15).

The mainstay of therapy for rosacea is antibiotic treatment. Initially, treatment is done with both oral and topical antibiotics. When the condition is in remission, the oral antibiotic tapers off and the topical treatment continues for long-term control. Some patients may need periodic re-treatment with oral antibiotics for flare-ups of their disease. The oral antibiotics most often used are tetracycline, doxycycline, minocycline and erythromycin.

Although antibiotic treatment will control the outbreaks and decrease the redness of rosacea, antibiotics will not eradicate the network of tiny red blood vessels on the face.

For that, try photofacial, which is "Intense Pulsed Light" therapy to destroy the facial blood vessels. Most patients require a series of four to five treatments, performed at three-week intervals to achieve the best results. Rosacea patients should get started with treatments as soon as possible. The results of the photofacial treatments are always pleasing. As the redness disappears, many women are finding that they can use less makeup to cover up the redness, and experience a new self-confidence.

More information can be found at www.rosacea.org. 

An industry leader in non-surgical cosmetic procedures, Dr. Fiona Wright at Skin M.D. & Beyond, serves Plano, Dallas and surrounding areas. She has been featured locally on NBC5, ABC8 and in national magazines such as Elle, Good Housekeeping and Redbook. To learn more, visit www.FionaWrightMD.com or SkinMDandBeyond.com.