

Common teenage skin problems and how to take care of them

Almost every teenager has at least one skin issue. This is the time when they pay more attention to their appearance and a good skin helps to boost confidence. Not only are skin problems becoming more prevalent, there is also a boost in the cosmetic industry, with many trying to prey on vulnerable teenagers.

There are many factors that are compounding the skin problems. Global warming, pollution, severe stress, food eaten and lack of exercise can all add up and manifest on our skin. Above all, the hormonal changes that occur during the growth spurt of teenagers tend to make them more prone to diseases like Acne. However, there are a few simple measures taken during childhood and teenage years that can result in long lasting good skin.

One can start by identifying the skin type one has. This is classified into normal, dry, oily and combination skin. Few teenagers have normal skin, which consists of an even, smooth skin tone, soft texture and no visible blemishes, red spots or flaky patches. Normal skin has only few imperfections because of the balanced amount of moisture and oil, and a good blood circulation. People who are blessed with it, should only use a mild cleansing soap twice a day and a strong sunscreen. No other skincare regime is required.

Dry skin is dull, flaky and itchy with almost invisible pores. The skin surface can feel rough due to the abnormal shedding of skin cells. A person with dry skin should wash the face with luke-warm water and a mild cleanser, twice a day. Abrasive substances like toners and scrubs will irritate the skin, leading to more dryness and unevenness. A moisturiser (e.g Physiogel AI cream), without alcohol and perfumes, especially after a shower, tends to soothe the skin and lock in healing moisture. This will result in a soft and supple skin.

Oily skin is a little more challenging. Extra care is needed to deal with the shiny, acne-prone skin. They also have large open pores, blackheads and at times an uneven complexion. Hormones like oestrogen and testosterone increase in teenage years, stimulating the sebaceous glands to produce more oil leading to a shiny, acne-prone skin. Taking care of oily skin requires washing the face three times a day with plain soap and water. Over the counter cleansing pads help dissolve the oil and removes excess dirt from skin surface. The use of 'non-comedogenic' facial products is favoured. Rigorous removal of the sebum (oil) from the face can result in overcompensation and aggravation of the situation.

Combination skin is one where there are both oily and dry areas. Usually the "T-zone" (forehead, nose and chin) tends to be oily with large pores and blackheads, whilst the cheeks appear rough due to dryness. In this case, the use of a mild soap and luke-warm water, twice a day may suffice. A plain moisturiser used only on the dry areas, may normalise the skin tone.

Teenagers with all skin-types require good sun protection. A good sunscreen is one which has both a high UVB SPF and UVA SPF. A sunscreen with SPF greater than 30 is advocated when outside. People should refrain from staying in the sun

between 11am to 2 pm and renew the sunscreen regularly. A wide brim hat and long sleeves tend to offer some protection and should be used when possible. According to the latest research, most sun damage occurs during a young age, leading to various skin cancers later in life.

The most common skin disease affecting teenagers is Acne (pimples). The pimples usually occur on the face and less frequently on the chest and back. Basically the sebaceous glands get stimulated to produce more oil. This oil gets accumulated in the skin, due to genetically determined blockages at their exit. Bacteria breaks down the oil, leading to swelling, inflammation and pustules. Acne has at least four stages and treatment should be aimed at addressing at least three of them. Pimples should not be squeezed or popped as this can spread the inflammation, worsen the acne and lead to permanent scars. Early medical treatment can be very beneficial and can result in a long term remission. One should not be fooled by expensive cosmetics that claim to treat pimples but do not have the required level of evidence to support them (through studies). However, the use of facial cleansers containing salicylic acid or glycolic acid can help to get rid of the dead skin cells and lead to a slight improvement.

Keratosis pilaris is so common yet rarely talked about. It presents as rough skin mainly on the upper arms that can fluctuate seasonally. This roughness is a result of dead skin cells around hair follicles not shedding normally. This condition is life-long and can also affect the face and legs. Treatment is aimed at improving the condition by exfoliants, like a 20% urea cream.

Warts are very common in children and can persist into teenage years. They are unsightly growths affecting mainly the hands and feet. These are caused by the Human papillomavirus and can spread to other parts of the body. Thus early treatment can lead to quick resolution. A simple home remedy involves the use of lemon skin, soaked in brown vinegar for at least two days. Then pieces are placed on the wart every night and secured with tape. This can be continued for up to 4-6 weeks. One should contact the medical practitioner if complete resolution is not seen during that time period.

There are many other diseases that can inflict teenagers and most of them need proper medical management. As far as skin care goes, one should keep it simple as expensive products rarely equates to flawless skin. Of course, good sun-protection will not only prevent premature ageing but also prevent many skin cancers. If unsure, one should contact the medical practitioner, who will be able to advise further.