

Teens Take to Esthetic Treatments

By Linda Knittel

Originally published in Skin Deep, August/September 2005. Copyright 2005. Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals. All rights reserved.

The teenage years are wondrous days filled with fun and friends, phone calls and movies, school dances and socializing. And for a number of kids, these years are also filled with acne. Not only are those embarrassing whiteheads, blackheads, and dark red lumps painful, they can also scar the skin and crush self-esteem during one of the most difficult times of life. Fortunately, along with good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle, skin treatments can make a world of difference in a teenager's complexion and self-confidence.

A number of factors such as diet, personal hygiene, and genetics seem to play into the incidence of teenage acne, but in all cases hormones are involved. During puberty, hormone levels surge, often causing a hardening of the oil in the pores of the skin, preventing sebum from naturally making its way to the surface. Add to this an increase in bacteria in the pores, also due to hormones, and you have a recipe for swollen, painful pimples.

According to the American Academy of Dermatology, between 85 percent and 95 percent of U.S. teenagers develop acne, and many of them will continue to battle the condition into their 20s and 30s. By addressing the condition early, and learning that proper skin care can make a world of difference, many of these teenagers can prevent permanent scarring and avoid the emotional distress acne can cause.

Beating Blemishes

"We are seeing a lot more teenagers these days," says Marilou Magat-Myers, director/instructor at the Euro Institute in Beaverton, Ore. She attributes the influx of young clientele to the facts that going to spas has become a very hip thing to do and the right treatments can be very effective at clearing up teenage acne. "We teach a two-pronged approach: detoxifying both the skin and the internal workings of the body," she says.

In addition to recommending a cleansing tea of yarrow, milk thistle, and dandelion to their teenage clients, the students at the Euro Institute suggest kids steer clear of soft drinks, sugar, and the fast and fried foods they love so much. According to a recent study published in the Archives of Dermatology, the high level of refined carbohydrates and sugar in the Western diet may be one reason up to 95 percent of teenagers suffer from acne. The research team spent seven weeks observing the skin and lifestyle of a village of people in Papua, New Guinea. Results showed there was absolutely no acne in the more than 1,200 people studied, including 300 15- to 25-year-olds.

Unlike American teenagers, the islanders eat a mostly low-fat diet rich in fruits and vegetables, which keeps their insulin levels low. Research has shown that when insulin levels rise, the production of hormones, such as testosterone, increases, which then stimulates the production of oil in the pores. Over time these pores become clogged and acne develops. Therefore, eating a diet full of foods that keep insulin levels low may be one key to clear skin.

But blemish-free skin can also be the result of regular facials. Unlike rejuvenating treatments, acne facials require a gentle approach that focuses on cleansing, soothing, and reducing inflammation. "It is all about unclogging the skin and allowing it to calm down," says Laura Mapes, an esthetician in Portland, Ore. Therefore, acne facials should not be too stimulating and often are centered on extractions and ridding the skin of clogged pores rather than massage. Various types of peels such as glycolic, salicylic, and lactic can also help remove dead skin, masks can detoxify, and resurfacing techniques can help restore the skin's integrity. "Microdermabrasion and other resurfacing techniques are great, but only after the skin has healed," Magat-Myers says.

Of course each client will require a slightly different protocol, but it is safe to say recommending a facial one to two times a month will greatly reduce acne breakouts. In addition, teaching teenagers about healthy at-home skin care and sending them off with good products are also keys to getting the results they want. However, sometimes kids don't have the patience or discipline to make the necessary changes. "If you can't get a kid to drink more water, wash with good product, and eat well, then it is going to take a while," Mapes says. When teens want a quick fix, it is time to send them to a dermatologist. "I think a natural approach is healthier, but a short course of antibiotics can definitely jumpstart the healing process for a kid who does not have the patience to wait," Magat-Myers says. "Of course facials are ideal even when kids are under the care of a dermatologist."

Perhaps the most important skill to learn when dealing with teenage acne is how to best approach your clients. Since kids tend to be sensitive and self-conscious during their teen years, it is crucial to help restore their confidence. "We give them hope by teaching them good skin care practices and letting them know they are not alone," Magat-Myers says. "Acne does not have to be a life sentence."

Linda Knittel is a freelance writer in Portland, Ore. Her work has appeared in Yoga Journal, Natural Health, Fitness, Gourmet and other publications.