

DIET AND ACNE

SUCCESS REPORTED When it comes to acne, there are multiple factors at play, including genetics and hormones. For some people, their diet is another factor. Based on experiments, some people with acne have improved when they switched to eating a low glycemic load diet.

While dermatologists (for decades) doubted a relationship between diet and acne, that's now changed. A thorough review in 2010 by Drs. Bowe, Joshi, and Shalita revisited the earlier research, and found flaws in some of the earlier studies. More recent research has provided stronger evidence, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs). This type of research involves an experiment, and it's considered one of the best types of evidence for proving a link between diet and health.

In one experiment (by Dr. Smith and colleagues in Melbourne), researchers worked with a group of male patients who all had acne. They randomly assigned the patients to two groups.

One group ate a low glycemic load (GL) diet for 12 weeks. The other group ate their regular diet.

At the end of 12 weeks, the patients on a low GL diet experienced significantly more improvement in their acne.

In this study, one group was asked to follow a low glycemic load (low GL) diet. A low GL diet takes into account the quantity of carbohydrates consumed, as well as quality, by focusing on foods with a lower glycemic index. The glycemic index (GI) is a measure of how much your blood sugar level rises after eating a particular food.

As an example of diet changes in this study, volunteers ate whole grain bread instead of white bread. They also reduced their total carbohydrate intake by replacing high GI foods with foods that were higher in protein, such as fish and poultry.

This was not a low carb diet, since carbs made up 45% of the diet. Instead, it focused on the quality and quantity of carbs.

QUALITY: Whole grain bread instead of white

QUANTITY: Cut out high GI foods and replace them with higher protein foods

It's important to realize that they were NOT asked to follow a low carb diet. Their recommended diet plan was designed to provide 25% of energy from protein/ 45% from low GI carbs/ and 30% from fat. The suggested diet was also designed to provide the same number of calories as their previous diet.

The other group of volunteers served as a comparison group. They were asked to eat foods that were similar to their regular diet, with carbs that had moderate to high GI values.

Both groups followed their diet plan for 12 weeks, and the results were clear. The volunteers in the low GL group had fewer red bumps and pustules. They even had fewer whiteheads and blackheads.

Other research studies have found similar results. Testing has even shown that a low GL diet causes beneficial changes in hormone levels and skin sebum production. Skin biopsies of volunteers after a low GL diet have found smaller sebaceous (oil) glands and less skin inflammation.

Of course, it's important to realize that diet is only one possible factor in acne. The largest causes still remain genetics and hormonal changes, especially those related to puberty.

TRIGGERS Added sugars and refined carbohydrates can worsen acne in some people, because they act to spike blood sugar levels. This can increase the levels of certain hormones that promote skin inflammation.

The issue of dairy and acne is still unclear. We definitely need more research, but it does seem as though some people are more sensitive to dairy when it comes to acne. In one report, five teenagers developed treatment-resistant acne after starting whey protein supplements. (Whey comes from dairy.)

HELPERS In terms of foods that might help in acne, studies in humans are limited. Foods that are naturally rich in fiber are suggested, especially because they stabilize blood sugar levels. There has been some interesting research that suggests that omega-3 fatty acids and probiotics may help. There's also been interesting research into zinc, a mineral with anti-inflammatory properties. Although more research is needed, foods such as red kidney beans and shrimp are good sources of zinc.