SYMPTOM

Oily skin

Oily skin is excess skin oil that creates a shiny or greasy appearance

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Shiny or greasy skin that returns soon after washing

WHERE IT IS FELT
Face, scalp, chest, and upper back

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Genetics, hormone changes, hot or humid weather

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Painful spreading redness or swelling with fever

USUALLY LASTS
Depends on hormones, skin type, climate, and products

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Sudden persistent oiliness or acne is painful or scarring

Overview

Oily skin happens when the sebaceous glands make more sebum than your skin needs. Sebum is a natural oil that helps protect the skin and keep it flexible.

Oiliness is most noticeable where sebaceous glands are concentrated. This includes the forehead, nose, chin, scalp, chest, and upper back. It may affect your whole face or mainly the central "T-zone."

Oily skin is a symptom rather than a disease. It often reflects your natural skin type, hormone changes, or your environment. It can also occur alongside acne or a flaky condition called seborrheic dermatitis.

Having oily skin does not mean your skin is dirty. Washing more often or scrubbing hard usually does not solve the problem and may cause irritation.

What it may feel or look like

Your skin may look shiny or feel greasy, sometimes soon after washing. Makeup or sunscreen may slide, separate, or wear off quickly. Pores can look more noticeable, especially around the

nose and cheeks.

Other possible features include:

Oiliness and moisture are not the same thing. Skin can produce plenty of oil while still being irritated or lacking water. For that reason, oily skin may still benefit from a light moisturizer.

- Blackheads, whiteheads, or inflamed spots
- An oily scalp or hair that becomes greasy quickly
- Red, itchy, or flaky areas around the scalp, eyebrows, or nose
- Dryness or stinging caused by harsh skin products

Common causes

Common causes include your genes and normal hormone activity. Hormones called androgens stimulate sebaceous glands. Oil production often increases during puberty and may change around menstrual periods, pregnancy, or menopause.

Hot or humid weather can make oiliness more noticeable. Heavy cosmetics, hair products, or skin products may also leave a greasy layer or block pores.

Acne commonly occurs with oily skin. Sebum can mix with dead skin cells and help block a hair follicle, creating blackheads or whiteheads. Bacteria and inflammation can then contribute to red or painful spots. Oily skin alone does not mean you will develop acne.

Less common causes include seborrheic dermatitis, which can cause greasy scales, redness, and itching on the scalp or face. Some medicines, including certain hormone treatments, may affect oil production.

A noticeable hormone imbalance is less common. For example, polycystic ovary syndrome can cause acne or oily skin together with irregular periods, increased facial or body hair, or scalp hair thinning. These symptoms have several possible causes and need a proper assessment.

Urgent causes are unusual. Oily skin by itself is not generally an urgent symptom. Painful, hot, rapidly spreading redness or swelling with fever may indicate a skin infection rather than simple oiliness.

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if the oiliness starts suddenly, remains difficult to manage, or is affecting your confidence or daily life. You should also arrange an assessment if you have acne

that is painful, leaving scars, or not improving with suitable non-prescription care.

Routine medical advice is also appropriate if oiliness occurs with:

Seek same-day medical care if an area becomes painful, hot, swollen, or rapidly more red, especially if you have a fever or feel unwell.

Call emergency services if you develop swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat, or have trouble breathing. These are signs of a possible severe allergic reaction, not typical oily skin.

- Irregular or absent periods
- New coarse facial or body hair
- Scalp hair thinning
- Greasy, itchy scaling that keeps returning
- A change that began after starting a medicine

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will usually ask when the oiliness began, which areas are affected, and what skin, hair, and makeup products you use. They may ask about acne, itching, scaling, medicines, menstrual changes, or other hormone-related symptoms.

Examining the skin is often enough to identify acne, irritation, or seborrheic dermatitis. There is no routine test that measures whether skin is "too oily."

Blood tests are not usually needed for longstanding oily skin. They may be considered when a sudden change occurs with irregular periods, increased body hair, hair loss, or other signs suggesting a hormone-related condition.

Treatment and self-care

Wash oily areas gently, usually in the morning and evening and after heavy sweating. Use lukewarm water and a mild, non-abrasive cleanser. Scrubbing, strong soaps, alcohol-based products, and frequent washing can irritate the skin.

Choose products labelled "oil-free" or "non-comedogenic." Non-comedogenic means they are designed to be less likely to block pores. A lightweight moisturizer can reduce dryness caused by cleansing or acne products. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen suited to oily or acne-prone skin.

Blotting papers can remove surface oil during the day. Press them against the skin rather than

rubbing.

A cleanser or leave-on product containing salicylic acid may help reduce blocked pores and surface oil. It can also cause dryness or stinging, so introduce one new product at a time and follow its label.

If acne is also present, treatments such as benzoyl peroxide or a topical retinoid may be appropriate. These can irritate the skin, and some treatments are unsuitable during pregnancy. A pharmacist or healthcare professional can help you choose safely.

Prescription treatment should target an identified problem, such as persistent acne, seborrheic dermatitis, or a hormone-related condition. There is no need to eliminate all sebum because it has a protective role.

What to expect

Natural oily skin often continues through adolescence and early adulthood, although it may become less noticeable with age. It can fluctuate with hormones, weather, stress, and product use.

A consistent, gentle routine usually works better than repeatedly switching products. Skin treatments often need time to show their full effect. Using several drying products together may cause irritation without providing better oil control.

If a medicine or another condition is contributing, the outlook depends on that cause. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without speaking with the person who prescribed it.

Common questions

Does oily skin mean my face is unclean?

No. Sebum is produced within the skin. Dirt can collect on the surface, but poor hygiene is not usually the reason sebaceous glands make more oil.

Should I avoid moisturizer?

Not necessarily. A light, oil-free, non-comedogenic moisturizer can support the skin barrier without feeling heavy. This may be especially helpful when acne products cause dryness.

Will washing more often stop the oil?

Frequent or harsh washing removes surface oil only temporarily. It can irritate the skin and make redness, stinging, or flaking worse.

Does oily food cause oily skin?

Eating oily food does not directly coat your skin in oil. Diet may influence acne in some people, but oily skin has several stronger influences, including genes and hormones.

Can oily skin cause large pores?

Oil and blocked material can make pore openings appear more noticeable. Pore size is also influenced by genetics and skin structure. Products may reduce their appearance, but they cannot permanently open or close pores.

Sources

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- NHS. Acne
- NHS. Polycystic ovary syndrome: Symptoms