



SOUND BODY

ASK DR. ELAINE

Sometimes physicians have to eat crow and admit that perhaps we don't know everything, and might, perhaps, even been wrong. This is one of those times. Admitting you might have been wrong is never fun, but at least we can try to do it gracefully.

Q: You guys have always said acne wasn't caused by soft drinks and chocolate. Now I hear you might be changing your mind. What is the real story on diet and acne?

A: First, let me say I reserve the right to change my thinking based on new evidence. However, you do have a point. Based on available scientific evidence dermatologists have long maintained diet and acne were not significantly related. The evidence still strongly points to heredity and hormonal influences as the primary causes of acne, with the additional triggers of stress, heat, sweat and certain cosmetics that plug pores.



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The role of diet in acne is now controversial again, with preliminary research showing some influence, but no large scale or definitive studies confirming an effect. The food types most commonly implicated are milk, caffeine and a high glycemic index (GI) diet.

Dairy, especially skim milk, has been weakly though consistently associated with acne in several retrospective studies. The mechanism is unknown, but it has been suggested that hormones and growth factors in milk might account for the association. A 2007 study carried out by Harvard School of Public Health found a clear link between those who drank milk regularly and suffered with acne. Interestingly, those who drank skimmed milk suffered with the worst breakouts, with a 44% increase in the likelihood of developing blemishes. It is thought that processing the milk increases the levels of hormones in the drink. They did not investigate whether the acne improved if the patients significantly decreased or eliminated dairy from their diet.

Glycemic index refers to a food's potential to increase blood glucose and insulin levels compared to the effects from the same amount of carbohydrates of another food. Examples of high GI foods include white bread, potatoes sugary soft drinks, and many processed foods.

Proponents of the link between high GI foods and acne point to endocrine responses of increased insulin-like growth factor one, growth factor binding protein, androgens and retinoid signaling pathways, which may lead to increased oil

gland activity and plugging of the pores. A small Australian study showed that young males who were put on a strict low GI diet noticed a significant improvement in the severity of their acne. There have been several small studies showing improvement in acne in patients following a low GI diet, but even the proponents of the low GI approach indicate that it is a helpful addition to standard acne treatment and will not clear acne.

Dietary influences in acne are an area that definitely needs much more research. Well-controlled, randomized trials will help sort out the role of milk and high GI foods in the development of acne, whether dietary manipulations will influence the course and if so to what degree. With dairy being a major source of much needed calcium, the benefits would need to outweigh the risks of inadequate calcium intake. A low GI diet appears to have little downside but is hard to follow.

It has been long known that for some people, caffeine in coffee, chocolate, caffeinated soft drinks may aggravate acne. A trial of less caffeine intake may be tried to see if your acne improves, if you can live in a world that does not include coffee and chocolate. I can't.

I wouldn't say yet that our thinking has changed, but we are "revisiting" it. Stay tuned. 