

# Beauty Breakdown: How Does Working Out Affect Skin? What The Research Says



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Welcome to the [Beauty Breakdown](#), our series that dives into today's buzziest

*beauty topics. In each, we focus on a different theme and highlight all the need-to-know basics, common mistakes, and the best products to get your hands on.*

Everything is skin care—exercise included. How we move our bodies most obviously affects our physical health, but it also influences our mental, emotional, and skin health as well. It's all connected and it's important that we care for our bodies holistically.

However, for so long there was a somewhat negative-tinted connection between working out and skin health. There are pervasive misconceptions about sweat causing acne or intense workouts contributing to premature aging (ever heard of runner's face?). And while improper skin habits surrounding the workout can lead to unwanted consequences, as a whole: The benefits of moving your body regularly far outweigh anything else.

And just in general, the intimate relationship between exercise and skin health requires a nuanced approach. So let's talk about it!



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## **The 101 on how working out affects the skin.**

Physical health and your complexion are intricately connected in infinite little ways. This influence can be seen both immediately ([flushing or redness right after hot yoga](#), for example) or in the long term (improved mental health leads to a more robust skin barrier). This means that answering *how* working out affects the skin isn't straightforward, as there are many internal factors at play. Not to mention, external and lifestyle habits surrounding your workout regimen can influence your skin health—adding additional complexity to the relationship.

Here are some things to consider:

- [Movement improves circulation](#), which will benefit skin. Our circulatory system and blood flow bring necessary nutrients, oxygen, and minerals to the whole body, [skin included](#)<sup>1✓</sup>.
- [Exercise improves mitochondrial health](#)<sup>2✓</sup>, too. [Mitochondria are vital for skin cell function](#)<sup>3✓</sup>—and as the energy source of the cells, they are integral in the collagen and elastin production process, barrier function, wound healing, and overall vitality.
- Working out improves stress and sleep management—and thanks to the [brain-skin axis](#), that means skin will benefit long term. Chronic stress and lack of sleep results in higher levels of the [hormone cortisol in the body](#)<sup>4✓</sup>. Cortisol [breaks down collagen](#) and elastin, damages our skin barrier, and can lead to breakouts. A robust amount of research shows that [working out helps regulate our stress response](#)<sup>5✓</sup> and improves sleep hygiene, and these benefits can be seen fairly quickly. It may take longer for it to show up in the skin, but it shouldn't be discounted.
- Intense workouts *can* lead to sallowness and sagging due to fat loss. When we think of skin's appearance, we tend to only think of the epidermis—but what's underneath will influence the complexion too, fat and muscles included. Having fat in our face is a good thing, as it can keep us looking plump and youthful. As part of the natural aging process, fat in the area disappears for many folks, which can exacerbate gravitational wrinkles, sagging, and sallowness. For extreme athletes (who tend to have [lower overall body fat](#)<sup>6✓</sup>), this can be a concern. However, for most folks, it won't affect the face enough to cause alarm.
- One of the most notable parts of this conversation isn't about exercise but all about the environment in which you're doing it. About [80% of skin aging can be attributed to UV exposure](#)<sup>7✓</sup>, and for outdoor athletes the risk of exposure increases. While getting sun and spending time outdoors has immense benefits (and should be encouraged!) unprotected exposure does harm your skin. In addition, pollution and particulate matter can [cause free radical damage](#)<sup>8✓</sup>, increasing the opportunity for premature aging.

Overall, working out has a major net benefit for the skin—moving your body will keep you looking more vibrant and healthy for longer. Often the concerns folks experience when they start a new fitness regimen has less to do with exercise itself and more to do with how they're treating their skin pre- and post-workout. But don't worry, we're here to help you troubleshoot that.

## The 6 things we're getting wrong right now.

Don't let the mistakes or misconceptions get in the way of a good workout—or glowing complexion.

- 1 Linking working out to breaking out.** Let's just set the record straight: "Contrary to popular belief, sweat itself does not lead to pimples," board-certified dermatologist [Joshua Zeichner, M.D.](#), said about the [common myth](#). Breakouts can occur from exercise, but that's usually due to wearing pore-clogging makeup or products during the session—or improper cleansing methods post-sweat.
- 2 Avoiding high-impact workouts due to "runner's face."** As we've noted, fat loss in the [face can lead to sagging with time](#). However, this is usually only in extreme cases—for most folks, workouts (even strenuous ones) won't lead to premature aging.
- 3 Not washing or overwashing.** Folks tend to fall into one of two camps: Not properly washing their face before or after a workout (which can lead to clogged pores, buildup, and dullness), or overwashing (which will strip the skin barrier, and can cause irritation).
- 4 Forgetting sunscreen before a long workout—and reapplying.** According to a 2020 survey about [nine out of 10 Americans don't wear sunscreen daily](#). The good news is that that number jumps up when it comes to wearing sunscreen when the person is going to be outdoors for an extended period of time: about six out of 10 say they'll wear sunscreen on those occasions. However, that's still a lot of folks unprotected from UV rays. In addition, building up a sweat means you need to be more diligent about reapplication—which most folks aren't good about.
- 5 Thinking that pollution is only a problem for city dwellers.** Pollution is perceived to be more prominent in major cities. However, a 2021 study found that while the size of the particulate matter was larger in urban areas, the [toxicity of the pollution was more so in rural areas](#)<sup>9✓</sup>, even if the molecule size was smaller. Read: Those exploring the great outdoors should still be focused on pollution protection.
- 6 Not addressing relevant skin conditions.** Over the long term, exercise has an [overall benefit for many inflammatory skin conditions](#)<sup>10✓</sup> (as it can help reduce

stress and inflammation in the body). However, in the short term, you may see flare-ups, as such is the case with rosacea. This shouldn't deter you from working out, but it should alter the ways in which you care for your skin pre and post.



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## The 5 steps you need to know.

If I haven't said this enough already: Moving your body is very important for overall health, skin included. With that out of the way: How you move your body—and what skin care routine you follow alongside it—will have an impact on how your skin looks and feels.

### 1. Protection is key.

The most important thing you can do for your skin is to protect it from damage. And given that the most egregious source of damage is environmental (the UV rays and pollution), that's where we should start the conversation.

You need to wear [sunscreen](#) when you're working out outdoors, and reapply if you're spending significant time in the sun (i.e., on a long run or hiking) or getting wet (i.e., watersports or sweating significantly).

Moreover, you should be incorporating [antioxidants](#) into your skin care routine to help your skin fight against free radicals and oxidative stress from environmental stressors. "Skin photoaging is a result of the oxidative stress from UV radiation," explains board-certified dermatologist [Kautilya Shaurya, M.D.](#) "Your skin naturally produces antioxidants; however, as your skin ages, these antioxidant levels often decrease."

### 2. Mind the wash.

With your wash schedule, balance is key. Washing your face too often—especially with sudsy, stripping cleansers that are often found at gyms and fitness studios—can lead to inflammation, dryness, and flare-ups. However, not

adequately washing your face can mean breakouts, clogged pores, and irritation.

So, what's the appropriate cleansing routine? Well, it really depends on [when you're working out](#). Here's what to know:

- If you workout in the morning, skip the face wash entirely as you won't have any makeup or product to remove. As board-certified dermatologist [Ellen Marmur, M.D.](#), tells us: "Sweat is the best facial cleanser." After your session, a quick rinse with water will do—followed by your normal skin care routine.
- If you work out in the evenings, you'll want to remove makeup and debris from the day prior to your sweat session. "When you exercise, your body heats up and your pores open. Makeup can settle in your pores and contribute to clogging them," says board-certified dermatologist [Keira Barr, M.D.](#) After, gently rinse with water and continue with your nighttime routine.

And as we always recommend, use a [non-stripping, calming face wash](#) that works for your skin type. If you're using the facilities at the gym or studio, this may mean you need to pack your own so you don't have to use the generic face wash provided.

### **3. Use calming ingredients post-sweat.**

Good general advice for any skin type to follow is to avoid harsh ingredients immediately following a workout. "Your skin may be more vulnerable to irritation shortly after a workout, as your pores are open," says Barr. Read: [Save the AHA serums and enzyme peels for another time](#).

However, those with sensitive or reactive skin should go a step further and look for calming ingredients and formulas:

- [Ceramides](#)
- [Peptides](#)
- Fatty acids
- [Aloe](#)

- [Squalane](#)
- [Biotic ingredients](#)
- [Niacinamide](#)
- [Allantoin](#)
- Botanical oils
- [Antioxidants](#)

#### 4. Focus on nutrition.

Both your body and skin need a diverse, nutrient-dense diet to thrive. You can't properly exercise or build muscle without sustained energy and fuel; your skin can't support itself without the tools to rejuvenate. And it turns out, many of the nutrients you're told to consume for fitness can also benefit the skin as well. (Win-win!)

To start, proteins always rank at the top of the list for building muscle and supporting energy levels. (There's a lot more to know about how much protein to consume for fitness support, [so check out this guide](#).) But protein is also essential for your complexion. Proteins are made up of amino acids, so consuming them can supply your body with the building blocks it needs to build [collagen](#), elastin, and keratin. In fact, brand-new research even shows that not [consuming enough protein can lead to clogged pores](#)<sup>11✓</sup>, discoloration, and even signs of premature aging. To up your intake of amino acids, check [out these sources](#), or perhaps consider a [collagen supplement](#).

That's not the only one: "Another macronutrient you shouldn't neglect after working out is fat. Healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats increase HDL 'good' cholesterol levels, which can [increase growth hormone production](#)<sup>12✓</sup> and create more amino acids for building muscle tissue," writes certified holistic nutritionist [Adam Meyer](#) about foods to consume post-workout. Healthy fats are also critical for skin function—notably [polyunsaturated fats](#)<sup>13✓</sup>, which play important roles in both the epidermis and dermis.

You should also be mindful of hydration. Staying hydrated is essential for a meaningful workout and can help your skin remain moisturized in the long run. No, chugging water isn't going to reverse the clock by a decade, but doing so

consistently does improve the appearance of the skin. In fact, studies have shown that getting the recommended amount of water for your body [increases the dermal layer](#)<sup>14✓</sup>, thereby making your skin more hydrated.

## 5. Utilize workouts that reduce stress.

Stress does a number on the skin. While stress-skin connection warrants its own library of literature, here's an abridged [rundown of the side effects](#): Cortisol depletes collagen and elastin (and can even inhibit the production of the proteins), damages the barrier, causes inflammation, and gets in the way of wound healing.

The best workout to reduce stress is one that you enjoy. However, if you're looking for practices that have been shown to regulate the stress response, "[cortisol-conscious](#)" workouts can be incredibly beneficial for many folks, notes naturopathic doctor [Marissa Castello, N.D.](#) A few examples of what she means:

- **Hatha yoga:** She notes that one study found that a single hatha yoga session helped participants [manage their stress levels](#)<sup>15✓</sup> compared to a control group.
- **Working out with your circadian rhythm:** We should all strive to work with our sleep schedules to make the most out of our days—workouts included! "Exercising at the right time for your body [has been shown](#)<sup>16✓</sup> to minimize post-workout cortisol spikes," she writes. So how do you find a time that's right for you? Honestly, you probably already know: Those who identify as morning people should do the a.m., and night people should exercise in the evening. Simple as that.
- **Mindful movement:** Many workouts can be mindful if you pay attention to how your mind and body are working together throughout the process—you just need to be present in your body. And a meta-analysis found that mindfulness practices can help [mediate the physiological markers of stress](#)<sup>17✓</sup>.



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## 2 extra ideas.

In case you want to go all-out, here are some extra suggestions:

- **Work out your face muscles.** Like your body, you can strength-train the muscles in your face. This is important because facial muscles can help your skin remain firm and lifted as you age. There are a [few ways to do this](#), but the most popular of late is through [microcurrent devices](#). Microcurrents work by stimulating the [facial muscles to help lift](#), tone, and contour the face—as well as promoting energy production in the cells.
- **Join an all-in-one wellness community.** Spaces are emerging all over the country as one-stop centers for all your beauty and well-being needs. Come for a facial; stay for the yoga classes and meditation sessions. Read more (and check out a few spots!) [here](#).

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Image by **mbg Creative** / mbg creative

## The 6 products to try.

For skin care items that support your skin before, during and after workouts, look no further.

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### Best face wash: Versed Skin Gentle Cycle Milky Cleanser



[VIEW ON TARGET](#) | \$15

[VIEW ON WALMART](#) | \$15

## Pros

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- Made with the skin's pH in mind (the pH of the wash is around 5.0-6.0)
- Packaging made with 50% PCR (post consumer recycled) plastic

## Cons

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- Some complaints of the smell (slightly like colloidal oat)
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**Highlights:** Dermatologist-tested, Vegan, Cruelty free, Sulfate free, Biome-friendly

**Ingredient call-outs:** Oat milk, Probiotics

It's all in the name: This milky face wash is gentle on skin. Made with comforting oat milk and biotic ingredients, this supports the skin barrier—not strip it. It's also infused with antioxidant-rich marula oil for extra conditioning properties.

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## Glow Recipe Avocado Ceramide Redness Relief Serum





[VIEW ON SEPHORA](#) | \$44

[VIEW ON GLOW RECIPE](#) | \$44

### Pros

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- In a consumer perception study, 96% said their skin felt soothed and 86% said redness was visibly reduced

### Cons

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- Small amount of product
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**Highlights:** Vegan, Cruelty free, Biome-friendly

**Ingredient call-outs:** Allantoin, Ceramides, Avocado

A trio of inflammation soothers make this serum a star: Avocado provides comforting fatty acids, a 5 ceramide complex supports the barrier, and **allantoin** calms redness and improves brightness. This is ideal for those who look flushed after a workout or sensitive skin.

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ADVERTISEMENT

## Tower 28 SOS Daily Rescue Facial Spray





[VIEW ON SEPHORA](#) | \$28

[VIEW ON CREDO](#) | \$28

### **Pros:**

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- Has the National Eczema Association Seal of Acceptance
- Can help ease blemishes

### **Cons**

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- Complaints of the smell — it's not for everyone
- 

**Highlights:** Vegan, Cruelty free, Biome-friendly

**Ingredient call-outs:** Hypochlorous acid, Sodium chloride

This pH-balancing spray can be used before, during or after a workout to reduce irritation, minimize redness, and boosts the skin's immune system. Bonus: Keep it in the fridge, so the mist is chilled when you spray—it can give a refreshing boost after a heart-pumping workout.

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## The INKEY List Omega Water Cream Moisturizer



[VIEW ON SEPHORA](#) | \$11

### Pros

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- Helps balance combination skin
- Non clogging formula

### Cons

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- Niacinamide may cause flushing when used in excess, so be sure to avoid using it elsewhere in your routine
- 

**Highlights:** Vegan, Cruelty free, Biome-friendly, Fragrance free

**Ingredient call-outs:** Ceramides, Niacinamide, Betaine

A super refreshing, non-clogging gel face cream that provides long-lasting hydration. (The light texture is perfect for before or after a workout.) The blend of ceramides, niacinamide, and betaine supports the skin barrier, while targeting fine lines and dullness.

## Grove Co. Microfiber Cleaning Towels



[VIEW ON GROVE CO.](#) | \$10

### Pros

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- Comes in a pack of 3
- Multipurpose – take one with you on your workouts, use the rest at home for cleaning!

### Cons

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- Needs to be washed frequently
- 

**Highlights:** Vegan, Cruelty free, Biome-friendly, Fragrance free, Certified B

Corporation, Reusable, Multi-purpose

**Ingredient call-outs:** 80% polyester + 20% polyamide

The towels provided at gyms or fitness studios are often rough on the skin and body—avoid them and bring your own! Microfiber towels are the softest option for both the skin and hair, as it's absorbent but never scratchy.

Image by **mbg Creative** / mbg creative

## The beauty breakdown.

There are many ways that body and skin health are intertwined—fitness being one of the most notable. Movement has many benefits for the skin (including stress reduction, improved circulation, and mitochondrial support), but it's vital that you adopt the right skin care habits alongside it so you don't end up damaging the skin in the process. For more insights on how to take care of your skin through lifestyle changes, check out our [guide to beauty sleep](#).

### Meet The Experts

**Alexandra Engler** is the beauty director at mindbodygreen and host of the beauty podcast Clean Beauty School. Previously, she's held beauty roles at Harper's Bazaar, Marie Claire, SELF, and Cosmopolitan; her byline has appeared in Esquire, Sports Illustrated, and Allure.com.

17 Sources



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