



Here's What Happens to Your Skin When You Don't Get Enough Sleep, According to 3 Dermatologists

Dark circles are just the beginning.

By Heather Muir Maffei | Published on February 16, 2026



Few comments irk me quite like, “You look tired.” Not because it’s mean, but because it’s usually true. Your skin doesn’t lie, and it definitely doesn’t

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#) can see it in my own reflection. When my [Oura ring](#) hands

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MEET THE EXPERT

[James Kilgour](#), MD, board-certified dermatologist [Golden State Dermatology](#) and founder of [KilgourMD](#)

[Hallie McDonald](#), MD, board-certified dermatologist in Austin, Texas, and cofounder of [ERLY](#)

[Ellen Marmur](#), MD, board-certified dermatologist, creator of [MMSkincare](#), and founder of [Marmur Medical in New York City](#)

Why Your Skin Needs Sleep

“Sleep is one of the most important—and most overlooked—pillars of skin health,” says James Kilgour, MD, board-certified dermatologist at Golden State Dermatology and founder of KilgourMD. During deep sleep, the body increases blood flow to the skin, ramps up collagen production, and accelerates cellular repair. In other words, this is prime time for restoration.

That’s also why nighttime skincare matters. Because the skin is in repair mode while you sleep, dermatologists often recommend using active ingredients like retinoids and peptides in the evening to support collagen production and cellular turnover. During the day, the focus shifts to think antioxidants and, of course, sunscreen.

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quality sleep, cortisol levels can rise and negatively impact your skin's ability to repair, while also reducing circulation and contributing to a dull, tired appearance," explains Hallie McDonald, MD, board-certified dermatologist in Austin, Texas, and cofounder of ERLY.

Exactly How Poor Sleep Shows Up on Your Skin

While you're snoozing, your skin is working. Cut that time short, and the effects can quickly start to show.

A weakened skin barrier

Sleep is when your skin repairs itself. Without enough of it, that restoration slows down. "Not getting enough sleep prevents your skin from repairing itself, leaving it dull, dry, and more prone to [fine lines](#), puffiness, and even itchiness," says Marmur. When your barrier is compromised, moisture escapes more easily while irritants and bacteria can get in—making skin more reactive, sensitive, and less able to retain hydration.

Over time, the damage goes deeper. "We can see impaired barrier function and slower healing of inflammation or breakouts," adds Kilgour. When your barrier is compromised, skin becomes more reactive, sensitive, and less able to retain moisture.

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Sleep deprivation also increases inflammation throughout the body, Marmur notes, which can show up as [redness](#), sensitivity, or flare-ups. As someone with redness-prone skin, I feel this firsthand. When I am only getting four or five hours of sleep, I tend to have more redness than usual. My cheeks even feel warm to the touch.

Marmur adds that the sleep-skin connection is so strong it actually has a name: the brain-skin axis, a well-studied psychodermatology phenomenon that explains how stress and the nervous system directly influence skin health.

Dullness, dark circles, and puffiness

If your complexion looks flat after a rough night, there's a reason. Increased cortisol and reduced circulation can leave skin appearing dull, tired, and less vibrant, McDonald says.

Poor sleep is also closely linked to [under-eye dark circles](#) and puffiness, partly due to fluid shifts and changes in circulation, Kilgour explains. Marmur adds that persistent dark circles can sometimes signal underlying issues like anemia, so it's worth checking with a physician if they don't improve.

Fake It Until You Make It

I do my best to prioritize sleep—I'm usually in bed by 9:30 p.m. and up around 5:30 a.m.—but life happens. The newborn and toddler years were

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redness creeps in, a green-tinted color corrector—like my go-to from Typology—helps neutralize and even out my complexion in seconds.

Of course, no beauty hack can truly replace quality sleep. But when I'm in a pinch, these small fixes help me look a little more refreshed—even if

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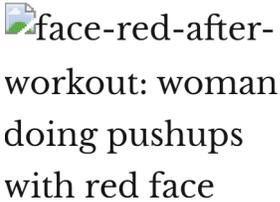
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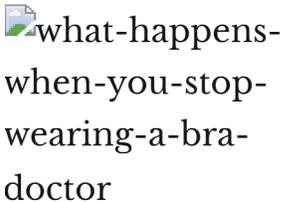
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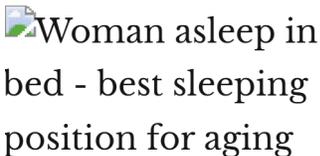
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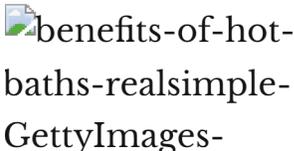
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