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BREAKING DOWN BREAKOUTS

After months of breakouts, Kacy could not stop thinking about how her face looked. She was so desperate to clear her skin that she refused to stop taking her daily acne medication, even though it caused her period to last for two straight months.

Kacy, not her real name, is one of 80% of adolescents who are affected by acne and one of 15% who suffer from severe acne. In a 2025 clinical study of adolescents and young adults with acne, half reported anxiety and low self-esteem.

Kacy began breaking out in middle school, and her acne eventually became cystic. After she spent long days playing outdoor sports, her acne would darken, leaving painful scars.

"I would wake up and look in the mirror every day, but I didn't feel ugly," Kacy said. "It felt like my acne was covering who I was. It made me feel like I wasn't me."

When Kacy was in eighth grade, her mother brought her to a dermatologist, who prescribed a new oral medication that immediately cleared up her skin. Yet her newfound confidence came at the cost of a predictable menstrual cycle.

"I was willing to make that sacrifice," Kacy said. "As a society, we're okay with destroying our bodies just for our looks, and that's really dangerous."

Media and pop culture only exacerbated Kacy's insecurities. In recent years, beauty trends like Korean "glass skin" have gone viral, celebrating glowing, blemish-free skin. When Kacy, a fashion lover, watched runway shows, she found herself focusing less on the clothes and designs and more on the flawless complexion of the models. The computer-enhanced skin of her favorite TV and movie characters left her feeling even more inadequate.

Though she understood that the actors were in the makeup chair for hours before shooting the scene, she could not help but notice how "their skin was perfect, their bodies were perfect, everything was perfect."

Kacy did not realize that her struggles were normal until she opened up to peers about her treatment. She was surprised to learn that others were taking the same medication, too.

"If I had known that all these other people didn't naturally have this clear, perfect skin, then I don't think I would've felt as bad as I did."

When senior Mattie Trefz began breaking out in sixth grade, she turned to social media. Following the advice of skincare influencer Hiram Yarbro, she started a 10-step daily routine consisting of two cleansers, hyaluronic acid, expensive moisturizers, skin masks, harsh exfoliants and chemical peels twice a week. None of it worked.

Two years later, a dermatologist prescribed her Tretinoin, a topical acne cream more concentrated than anything available over the counter. When that did not work, she signed up for a clinical trial by the skincare company Drunk Elephant. Even with the new products, her acne did not clear up.

At the start of her junior year, Trefz's dermatologist recommended Accutane, considered the most effective acne drug. After six years of creams, lotions and cleansers, her acne nearly cleared up in just a few months.

"It was my miracle drug," Trefz said.

But Trefz had trouble convincing her parents to let her take Accutane. The drug primarily works by reducing the oil production of skin glands, a leading cause of acne. As such, it has the highest rate of long-term acne remission. But "miracle drugs" come with risks: joint pain, dry skin and occasionally mental conditions like psychosis, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Todd, not his real name, went on Accutane as a freshman. He found that the drug affected his performance in track and field. The lessened oil production that was reducing his acne was also increasing the friction in his joints, making his body feel like a "rusty old machine."

Todd has no regrets about Accutane. His acne made him feel "dirty," and he worried others would perceive him as unhygienic. Having an unblemished face quickly boosted his self-esteem.

According to dermatologist Sindy Pang, a St. John's parent, Accutane is popular among teenagers for how easy it is to take and its consistent results. In 25 years, she has never seen Accutane not work effectively on a patient.

Pang says many parents perceive the drug as much more dangerous than it is. She claims it is hard to pinpoint Accutane as the cause of depression in the face of several other factors, including social issues and drug use.

But dermatologists still take precautions. Accutane is generally only prescribed to teenagers who have tried other medications unsuccessfully. Even then, doctors screen patients with a history of mental issues or antidepressant use, and they prohibit patients on the drug from using antibiotics, drinking alcohol and performing other high-risk activities.

For those hesitant to start Accutane, there are several less drastic options. From oral medicati-

ons to topical creams, alternative treatments are often more easily accessible but less effective.

Pimple patches – small hydrocolloid bandages designed to absorb pus and help an area heal – have become especially popular. Starface World, the largest pimple patch company, says it has sold over a billion individual patches since 2019.

"They're useful because not only do they cover the area up so people won't see it, they stop you from irritating or messing with the pimple by picking at it," Trefz said.

More than a health product, these patches have become a popular accessory and even a fashion statement for many teens. Instead of blending in with the skin like more traditional patches, Starface's bright Hydro-Stars add a pop of color.

"It destigmatizes the pimple because you're not trying to hide it – you're actually bringing attention to it, which is mentally helpful," Trefz said.

While acne peaks from ages 14 to 17 in girls, the range is 16 to 19 in boys because they reach puberty later. Senior Aaron Wu had clear skin in middle school, but high school brought its share of skin struggles.

"I think acne can definitely lower self-esteem because it's a visible thing about you," Wu said. "When you're talking to someone, sometimes it feels like that's all people can see."

Acne in boys tends to be more severe because higher testosterone levels drive more oil production.

"I've learned to persevere and realize that people don't care as much as you think," Wu said. "I've learned to not let it take away any other aspects of my identity."

For both genders, clearer skin is synonymous with increased confidence and self-esteem. Pang has witnessed this transformation firsthand.

"We'll have patients come in with acne that is really flaring up. Then after a few weeks or months, they're doing so much better, they're smiling, they're able to go out and wear that nice dress or bathing suit," Pang said. "It's a world of difference."

While Kacy admits that her journey to clear skin significantly increased her confidence, she points out that skin does not define who you are.

"Part of me getting all the skin creams and medication is telling myself that I can control my appearance, that I can make myself prettier. But really, you can't control if you're going to have a pimple this day or that day," Kacy said. "Having acne doesn't make you a worse human or say anything about who you are as a person."

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MATTIE TREFZ

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