

A MONTH *in my* SKIN

The link between hormones and skin health is inextricable. Eminé Ali Rushton looks beneath the surface to pinpoint how we can create a clearer, calmer complexion – simply by consulting the calendar

PHOTOGRAPHS JENS STUART/FOLIO-ID

There's one week out of every month when my skin glows; it just seems to play ball, and I don't even need to try. It's almost always around the second week of my cycle – day 14 tends to coincide with ovulation. During this time, I look healthier and more radiant; my eyes look brighter, as if bigger somehow, and my face always has a slimmer silhouette. A week later and things begin to change; some congestion, definite puffiness, radiance subsides, and the odd spot may come up along my chin or jaw. With period come and gone (day one of your cycle being the day that your period properly starts), dry and more easily sensitised skin becomes the thing.

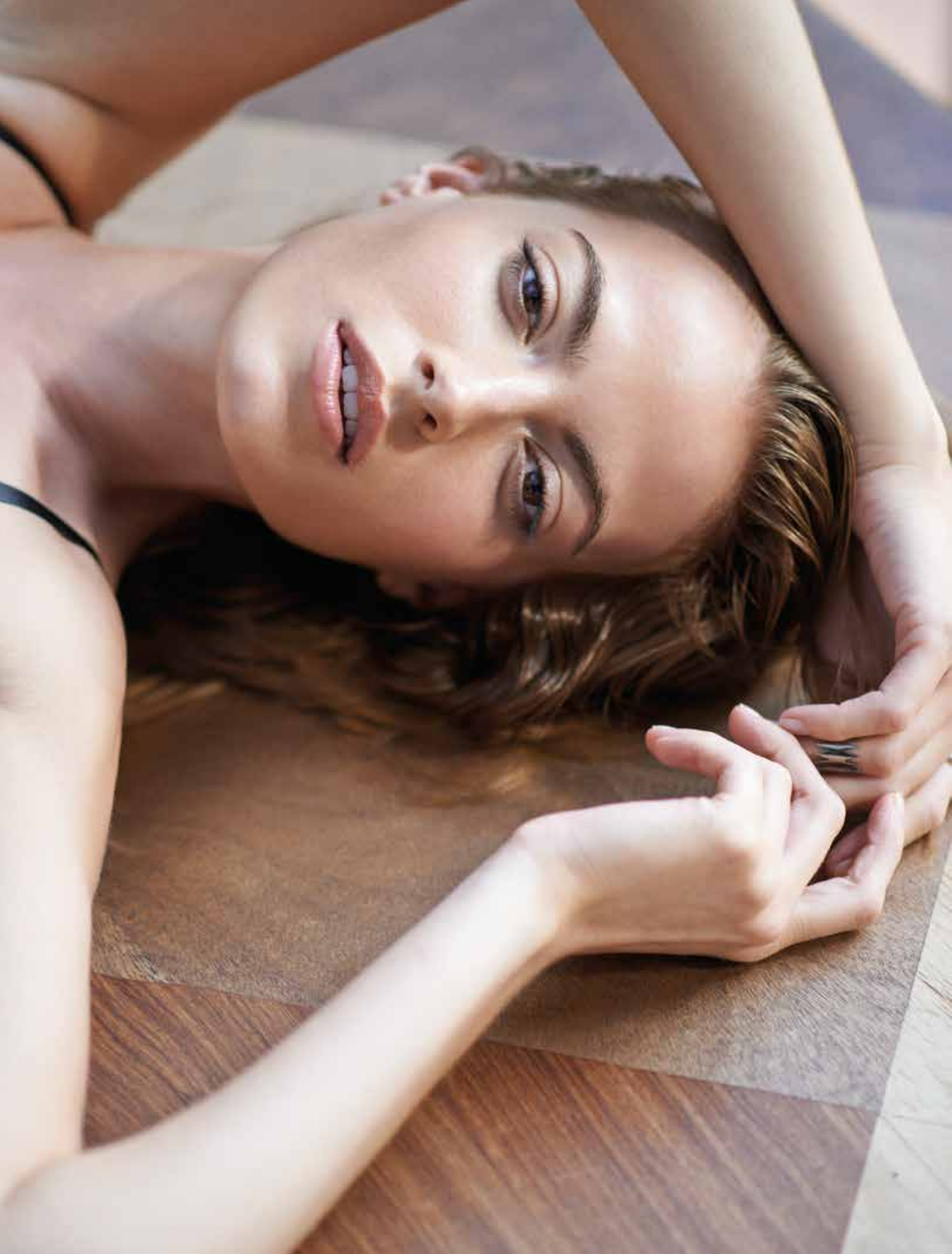
This, then, is the story of my skin – and, I might proffer – the story of yours, too. I have gone many years barely registering the fluctuations, but since studying to become a facialist and becoming increasingly interested in the holistic elements that govern our complexions, it has been satisfying to trace my own skin's shifting cycle. It has also been heartening to learn that

all of the above is commonplace, and that most of the women around me experience a similar thing. Yes, these changes are very real – actual, measurable physical manifestations – and not just 'in my head'. In actual fact, the shifts in our hormones during our monthly cycle can account for anything from a rise in body temperature of almost a degree (significant enough to make a human being feel noticeably warmer), to an increase in water-retention weight of almost half a stone (the average, according to Dr Raquel Dardik, a New York gynaecologist).

YOUR CYCLE

If you've ever looked at an ovarian cycle chart and been completely flummoxed (ironically, I came bottom of my Sex Ed class at school), this guide will help make sense of the science. You might also consider downloading Period Tracker, Clue or Glow (all available on iTunes), to help you stay on top of your cycle, and allow you an insight into why your skin, moods and energy levels fluctuate throughout the month. >>>



>>> **DAY 1**

This is the first day of your period, and this phase can last for up to seven days. ‘Hormonal changes are normal,’ reassures Dr Rabia Malik of Grace Belgravia. ‘Before and during menstruation, oestrogen and progesterone levels fall, while testosterone levels remain stable throughout the cycle.’ Levels of prostaglandin also rise and cause the uterine walls to contract (cramps) and make us more sensitive to pain with tender spots and skin that marks more easily. ‘Women closer to menopause, however, may experience an increase in oestrogen on day one,’ says Dr Bruce McLucas, assistant clinical professor at UCLA School of Medicine. So, pre-menopausal women can experience their most radiant skin at this time of the month instead.

How to treat skin now

Now is not the time to have waxing, threading or depilation – skin is more likely to scar or flare up, as a result. Don’t be tempted to over-treat your skin – sensitivity can be eased by switching to the simplest possible products at this time, such as cleansing with organic coconut oil, layering on a soothing serum, like S5 Calm Serum, £44, and using a calming treatment, such as Dr Hauschka Soothing Mask, £38.50.

DAYS 7-12

Post-period, we see an increase in oestrogen, and serotonin, the happy hormone. Most women feel better – and the elevation of mood often causes us to look better, too. Oestrogen also supports the production of collagen, so this makes sense: skin tends to feel plumper and softer, and we’re less likely to break out. I, however, sometimes notice that my skin looks paler than usual at this time, and that dark, undereye circles seem more pronounced. This can indicate a mild iron deficiency, not uncommon after menstruation. If this is something you’ve noticed, it’s worth getting red meat into your diet now (the most bioavailable source of iron to humans), but you can also absorb iron well via dark leafy greens, or a vegetarian supplement – I take Hübner Iron Vital F Supplement, from £6.49, in the days during and after my period, and it has made a noticeable difference to my skin and energy levels.

How to treat skin now

You may also notice dry patches around this time. With the increase in collagen comes an increase in cell turnover, so to help minimise dead skin cells, exfoliate gently in the days post-period, and boost hydration levels with a moisturising mask. I exfoliate with a gentle peel, such as Oskia Skin

Renaissance Mask, £48.50 followed by a thick layer of either Aurelia Cell Revitalise Rose Mask, £65, or Antonia Burrell Mask Supreme 7-in-1, £57. I also use a thick layer of organic live yogurt to gently exfoliate and hydrate – layer on with fingers after cleansing and rinse off after 20 minutes.

DAYS 12-16

Oestrogen and luteinising hormone are at their highest levels now. Fertility experts and research scientists also suggest that peaking fertility produces a peak in attractiveness – no coincidence, says Dr Daniel Sister, a leading fertility expert and hormone specialist, as this is when you’re ovulating, and oestrogen levels begin to build again. ‘You know how it feels when you fall in love? Your skin glows, you feel wonderful and have limitless energy,’ says Dr Sister. That’s the power of oestrogen.

This week of radiant skin is often accompanied by a better mood, a feeling of levity, and better concentration. Pores look smaller; your face looks fresher. ‘Oestrogen helps keep skin and hair youthful by promoting collagen production, and maintaining fluid balance, while androgens, such as testosterone, can contribute to sebum production,’ says Dr Alexis Granite, dermatologist at Cadogan Cosmetics. If, however, this is the time you break out along your jawline, this could suggest an excess of oestrogen. It’s worth tracking skin changes for a few cycles to pinpoint the dates of breakouts

to help identify a hormone that may be imbalanced.

How to treat skin now

Elevated oestrogen can make us produce more melanin, leaving us prone to developing pigmentation or melasma. I use an SPF every day (Pixi Tint & Conceal, £26.50), but it’s important to cover skin well on holiday during this time. La Roche-Posay, Sisley, Clarins and Payot make my favourite sun-care products.

DAYS 17-28

This is the luteal phase, and if the ovum in the uterus is not fertilised, the body begins to prepare for menstruation. The first half of this phase is characterised by a rise in progesterone, which can calm skin that is naturally drier, but can make others’ far oilier. This, says Dr Malik, is also ‘when oestrogen dips, meaning that testosterone levels are relatively higher just before menstruation begins. This also activates sebaceous glands, causing an increase in sebum production. This dip in oestrogen and predominance of testosterone before your >>>

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>>> period can also cause acne by promoting stickiness of skin cells that makes pores more susceptible to clogging,' says Dr Alexis Granite. 'These changes may then allow the sort of environment that causes an increased growth of P. acnes – a bacterium implicated in acne – as well as skin inflammation.' If you consistently suffer red, sore, cystic spots the week before your period, it's worth making a note of precise dates. If the severity increases and makes you unhappy, a GP will often suggest the combined pill to help stabilise testosterone levels. We suggest trying several other things first though (see panel, right).

How to treat skin now

It's at this point in the month that one need invest a bit more time in the prevention of breakouts. 'The week before your period always requires more careful cleansing. To minimise skin bacterial overgrowth, avoid touching your face and clean your mobile phone regularly,' says Dr Malik. I've noticed that a twice-weekly peel helps shift the dead cells that might otherwise lead to a spot. I don't exfoliate more than twice a week, but in the week leading up to my period, I will use a peel twice. I am always cautious to apply an antioxidant-rich serum afterwards to help newly-peeled skin deal with UV rays, and never skimp on the SPF.

If you *do* get a spot

My very best advice is to just leave well alone. No deep, sore, cystic spot will *ever* be helped with probing or squeezing. The only spot you should attempt to squeeze is a comedone (blackhead) or small whitehead (and only then very gently, and after skin is cleansed and steamed to soften sebum and aid the extraction). For cystic spots, 'I would recommend anti-acne topical ointments that contains salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide and applying it daily to your troubled areas to prevent new pimples from forming,' says Dr Granite.

The hormone and stress link

Dr Sister and Susie Rogers, founder of BeautyWorksWest, are co-authors of *Your Hormone Doctor* (Penguin, £12.99) and believe that the biggest impact upon our hormonal balance, and subsequently, our physical appearance, is stress. 'Our advice is to try to take control. Things that really help achieve this include meditation, sex, exercise, laughing... all these will lower cortisol levels – crucial for maintaining balanced hormones. Also, watch what you eat. Yes, we often crave chocolate pre- or post-period (also a sign that we're low on magnesium), but go for dark chocolate instead of sugary processed milk chocolate. Avoid excess sugar and salt, and load up on clean, healthy water.

For more information, see cadogancosmetics.com; drdanielsister.com; beautyworkswest.com; gracebelgravia.com

HEALTH & DIET

Leading nutritional therapist, and *Psychologies* columnist, Eve Kalinik shows you how to eat to balance your hormones

- First and foremost it's important to acknowledge the 'which' and 'why' – which hormones might be out of balance and why this might be happening. A blood test is a good place to start, but you can also keep track of your skin over two or three cycles to get a good idea of what's going on inside your body.
- Omega-3 foods – think oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel, anchovies and sardines, and chia seeds, flax seeds and their oils will all help nourish the cell membrane and provide the appropriate nutrients that help support hormones in the body.
- Include plenty of leafy greens, including rocket, spinach, kale and broccoli, although with the latter two make sure you steam rather than eat raw if you have any history or predisposition to thyroid issues.
- Drinking plenty of water is also key to supporting detoxification. Make this more liver-supportive by adding fresh lemon or lime juice. First thing in the morning is a good time to have this with warm water.
- With regard to conditions such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, research suggests a low-sugar diet (fructose included) can help to better support hormone-balancing, and having protein with each meal or snack will help regulate blood sugar levels.
- If stress is your thing then reduce your intake of caffeine, alcohol and sugar, and include foods such as avocados, green leafy veg, and nuts and seeds. Liquorice tea is also great for moderating stress responses and some people find that maca (which comes as a powder that you sprinkle on to food), can help, too. Most importantly, include plenty of restorative activities in your day and get good sleep.
- Some clients have found results by eliminating dairy from their diet (to balance reproductive hormones), but make sure you include plenty of calcium-rich, non-dairy alternatives, such as fortified, unsweetened almond milk, broccoli, pak choi, tofu and tahini, and stick to a six-week phase, slowly reintroducing dairy back into your diet, looking for any changes to your skin once you do so.