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Does Whey Protein Cause Acne? The Correlation Between Breakouts and Protein Shakes

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When you're suffering from a frustrating skin condition, like adult acne, it's common to want to find a cause behind your breakouts and blemishes. Skin-care habits, medications, hormones, and dietary habits are all often considered by dermatologists as possible causes or factors. Among these possibilities, perhaps surprisingly, is the consumption of whey protein. Allow us to explain.

Milk is made of two proteins, casein and whey, explains Vanessa Risetto, a registered dietitian/nutritionist in Hoboken, New Jersey. She says that benefits of the protein can include weight loss and lowering cholesterol, but that "consistent high doses of whey protein may also cause acne," but studies are both new and pending.

Top dermatologists agree. Shari Marchbein, board-certified dermatologist and clinical assistant professor of dermatology at New York University School of Medicine in New York City, is often asked by her patients if diet is a contributing factor to their acne. Her answer? "In the world of diet and acne, dermatologists have some good evidence as far as what to tell our patients to steer clear of," she tells *Allure*. "For example, high-glycemic index foods (high-carb/high-sugar foods that cause a rapid spike in blood sugar), like skim milk, and more recently, whey protein."

Estee Williams, a board-certified medical, cosmetic and surgical dermatologist and assistant clinical professor in dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City further explains, "Whey protein has been reported in numerous case studies to trigger acne in

those taking it to build muscle mass or gain weight." Luckily, she clarified that it's not a "universal risk factor" — meaning that not everyone who consumes foods containing whey protein will get acne as a result. She does warn, however, "certainly if it does aggravate your skin, you should avoid it."

Beverly Hills-based dermatologist **Ava Shamban** says the connection between diet and acne has been reported and is just now formally being explored in trials. In one of these trials, she says, male athletes who consumed whey protein for the purposes of bodybuilding were examined. Surprisingly, she notes, "while 50 percent had acne at the beginning of the study, after eating the whey protein 100 percent developed acne," noting that the study's subjects, "were working out quite a bit, too, although they were athletes before beginning the study."

Another study, published in the *Anais Brasileiros de Dermatologia*, examined 30 adult athletes (11 female and 19 males) in Brazil. Fourteen patients reported a history of acne, and whey protein was the supplement reported to be used the most among 22 of the participants. The result, per the study: "Employment of protein-calorie supplements demonstrated a significant association with the onset and exacerbation of acneiform lesions."

While more thorough, conclusive research is needed, Marchbein believes that the result of scientific studies is supported by anecdotal evidence from fellow dermatologists which has shown that, "acne often improves when whey protein is eliminated from the diet and will flare again when introduced." For her patients, specifically those not responding to medications as hoped, she inquires about their whey protein consumption and recommends eliminating it from their diets for two to three months and asks them to monitor potential improvement.

However, if whey protein *is* eliminated from one's diet, there isn't really an equal replacement nutritionally speaking, says Risetto. "Theories for whey causing acne are as simple as the connection between dairy consumption and acne," she says. Another potential connection between whey protein and acne? Whey can increase insulin and insulin-like growth factor levels. "Whey can encourage the production of a peptide in the gut that then stimulates the production of insulin," says Risetto. "Insulin is known to increase the influence of sebum production, which can cause the perfect environment for acne."

The bottom line? While the link between whey protein and the production of acne-causing bacteria has yet to be definitively proven, Shamban says there *is* a connection established but "more studies need to investigate with a controlled population." Until then, if you are suffering from a breakout, try one of these *Allure* editor-approved spot treatments to zap zits fast.

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