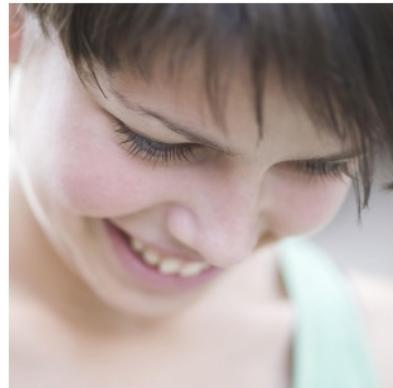


Living with rosacea

A personal account of this hereditary skin condition

By Candace Nelson



"Ohmygod! Your face is so red!" a girl in my boot camp fitness class exclaimed at me during our strenuous workout session. I smiled through my annoyance and said, "I know."

"You get so red!" she squealed again as we gathered up our things after class.

That time I might have glared at her.

I have a skin condition called rosacea. I know my face gets red. I don't need it pointed out to me. Even though heat and vigorous activity make it worse,

I'm not going to use it as an excuse not to work out.

Rosacea is a hereditary condition — my mom, sister, two aunts and an uncle all have it. Anecdotally, my grandfather had it, though his diagnosis was psoriasis and eczema. The condition is characterized by redness of the face. No cure exists, though flare-ups can be mitigated.

I was crushed when I was diagnosed around age 30. My dermatologist explained I should avoid alcohol, spicy food and hot beverages.

"So all the things that make life worth living?" I asked glumly. But rosacea hasn't stopped me from having a life worth living. In fact, I don't even think about it very often. I can still enjoy a hot latte and Thai takeout.

In addition to my redness, I get some bumpiness on my face. This is known as subtype 2 rosacea. It is believed that rosacea gets worse over time, but the disorder is little understood, according to the National Rosacea Society and my dermatologist. My older family members report their conditions have improved with age, but it could be that they've learned to control it.

The NRS says rosacea is becoming increasingly widespread. It often makes its appearance after age 30 and is most common among women of European descent. The common sign is redness across the face, neck, chest or scalp. Overtime, visible blood vessels may appear. When rosacea's left untreated, bumps and pimples often develop. In severe cases, the nose can swell up. In different strains, rosacea can affect the eyes.

The NRS recommends seeing a dermatologist if you suspect you have rosacea. The symptoms can be mitigated with treatment.

Oral medications help, but they've made my mom and me feel sick to our stomachs, so we've quit them. I've tried topical lotions and creams. They've never worked well. One aunt swears by an over-the-counter allergy medication to tone her redness down. The NRS lists foods high in histamine as a common trigger, so taking an antihistamine with those foods helps.

According to the NRS, the skin condition affects more than 16 million, many of whom are undiagnosed. Rosacea also can have psychological, social and occupational impacts.

"Rosacea's impact on appearance can be a disabling blow to the emotional and social lives of those who suffer from this poorly understood condition," said Dr. Mark Dahl, chairman of the NRS Medical Advisory Board, in a press release. "In addition, the stress of facing friends, family and co-workers can act as a trigger for flare-ups, leading to a tailspin that can become increasingly difficult to bear."

I don't enjoy having rosacea, but I'm not ashamed or embarrassed by it. On a bad skin day, I remind myself I could have something much worse as I dust some mineral powder over the sunblock on my cheeks and forehead. In fact, my friends are usually surprised when I tell them I have a skin condition because I cover it up, except when I wipe my face off at the gym or the end of the day. Still, it's not fun to explain why my face is deep purple like a grape to the entire fitness class.

A rosacea diagnosis doesn't have to be detrimental. A little makeup, frequent sunscreen application, a confident attitude and swapping red wine for white works for my family. I haven't missed hot tubs or saunas once.