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Beauty 911

Fast fixes for pimples, cold sores, sunburn and more

So I was lying in my bed in NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases, here in New York City, the night of my hip replacement. It was very late. The nurse walked into the room, a solemn expression on her face. “Jane,” she said, “there’s a little emergency I would like to discuss with you.”

Emergency? *Emergency!* It could only be one thing: I was dying. But why would they send the nurse in to tell me this? At 3 o’clock in the morning, no less. Doctors don’t always like to do the dirty work, I figured. I mean; I watch Grey’s Anatomy.

“I just saw something in your chart,” she continued, in a voice so void of negative emotion that I truly marveled at her professionalism in the face of death. But then again, if she wasn’t accompanied by a crash cart, could it really be that fatal? Yes! Several lives flashed in front of my eyes. Perhaps my temperature or blood pressure was spiking, signaling imminent rejection of the new hip! Or maybe the tests that they had taken earlier indicated I had suffered significant blood loss during the operation and could go into shock at any given moment. For someone who thinks that chapped lips could be a precursor to a brain tumor—or lung cancer—everything seemed possible!

“I read that you are a beauty, health and fitness expert,” she launched right in. “Well, I have a big date this weekend. And a huge pimple just popped out on my chin. I was sure you’d know what to do about it. Apparently you’ve been in this field for quite some time!” “I have indeed!” (I knew I should have lied about my age when I filled out the forms.) In any case, greatly relieved, I gave her some quick advice—buy some ‘Camphor Spirit,’ a solution of alcohol and camphor (if not at the chain drugstores, then at Amazon.com) and dab it onto the pimple. It should dry it up and take it away in no time.

I am, in fact, always fielding beauty questions, and not just from those wonderful nurses at NYU. Indeed, we all have experienced a beauty disaster of some sort. Like waking up on the day of a big event such as a wedding or business interview with an acne breakout, or having to cancel a first date because a cold sore erupted. While neither of these is a life-threatening condition, for some women (ahem!) they might just as well be.

For solutions to these problems and other dermatological angsts, I like to consult my go-to medical expert, Dr. Rebecca Baxt, a Manhattan/New Jersey board certified dermatologist. And as a female doctor, she is also not immune to these skincare 911’s herself. For the purpose of this column, she shared her expertise on what can be done to mitigate various conditions, starting with that cold sore.

If you pay her an office visit, she will most likely suggest a cortisone injection. “Very diluted cortisone into the cold sore can bring the inflammation down quite rapidly,” she says. “If you are afraid of needles, ask your doctor to call in a prescription for Valtrex, Famvir, or Acyclovir.” You can pick up Abreva, an over-the-counter medication. If you can’t make it to the pharmacy, you can try some old-fashioned remedies: Visine will help take the red out. “You can also take Tylenol or ibuprofen.”

Having an allergic episode? “Well, the first thing you need to do is stop applying whatever is causing it. And if it’s something you’ve never experienced before, go immediately to your dermatologist,” she cautions.

In general, though, for skin allergies the doctor suggests using an over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream twice a day; and taking Allegra, Claritin or Zyrtec, which are longer acting and less sedating than Benadryl. Or you can try a whole-milk compress for 10 minutes twice a day. To cancel out the redness entirely, use the cream and then cover it with a green-tinted concealer. The opposite of red is green, so this combination will create a flesh-toned hue. A good quality tinted moisturizer naturally has green/yellow undertones and also provides moisture to dry skin.

What about cystic acne breakouts? They are obviously much worse than the ordinary, garden variety pimple. What to do! “There are some who use a lancet or small knife to cut into a cyst and fish out the clogged part of the pore,” Dr. Baxt says. “But cutting open a cyst is extremely risky. You not only run the risk of getting an infection, but also of scarring, as in a permanent skin indentation or protrusion.” And what if you cut open a cyst but can’t get out the root clog? “You really don’t know where the root is or how deep it resides inside your skin if any remnants of the clog remain, the cyst is likely to get re-inflamed and come back even worse. It’s also not exactly good to dig around and squeeze the wound. Doing so will only make a bloody mess, increase the chance of skin scarring, and prolong the time it takes the cyst to heal.”

As a little insider info, Dr. Baxt tells me the anti-cyst secret of many actresses and supermodels: A steroid shot. “When we discuss treating acne with cortisone or ‘steroid’ shots,” she explains, “we are referring to the process of gently placing a very diluted quantity of a ‘glucocorticoid’ steroid into the cyst. Glucocorticoids are a class of steroid molecules that are naturally produced by our bodies and have numerous functions including the regulation of human metabolism, immunity, and inflammation. They have very potent anti-inflammatory effects so they are often used to treat inflammatory diseases in medicine. They can be formulated as creams to treat skin rashes or as pills to treat systemic disease.” They can also be injected directly into local areas of inflammation such as in arthritic joints and inflamed acne cysts. Within one or two days the steroid will shrink the inflammation producing relief of pain and almost immediate cosmetic improvement.

To reduce the puffiness of puffy eyes, another common complaint, I always recommend a cool compress, cucumber slices, or even cooled tea bags as tannins are known to help reduce swelling. “Applying those for 5 to 10 minutes can constrict blood and lymph vessels,” she agrees, “and since puffiness can be caused by a high salt diet or alcohol, try to cut out both before an important occasion.”

Moving right along to another impending summer woe —sunburn. Take a cool bath or shower, “but avoid using soap, bath oils, or other detergents which can irritate your skin and possibly make it even worse .If you have blisters forming, take a bath instead of a shower. The water pressure might pop them. When you get out, let yourself air dry, or pat the towel in small, gentle movements. You can also apply cold, wet compresses to your skin. Dampen a washcloth or other piece of fabric with cold water, and lay it over the affected area for 20 to 30 minutes. Re-wet as needed.”

Aloe Vera can be extremely soothing but don’t rub it in all the way, like you might with a regular lotion. “Leave it a bit goopy and moist on top of the burn, which helps prevent the skin from drying out and becoming more irritated; and reapply frequently.” Also, cortisone creams contain a small dose of steroids that can work to reduce inflammation to your sunburn. “You can find low-dose, over-the-counter tubes at your local drug store or supermarket.” Try to make sure your garments are cotton (which allows your skin to “breathe”) and as loose as possible, like baggy T-shirts or pajamas. Sunburns can be dehydrating, so it’s important to counterbalance this by drinking a lot of water while you recover, at least 64 oz. each day. As you start to heal, liberally apply a creamy, unscented moisturizer to sunburned areas over the next few days or even weeks to prevent peeling and irritation.

Okay, now for the more invasive. We all know women who have gotten face fillers right before, say, a school reunion to make them appear years younger than their former classmates. Instead, though, they end up looking like they did two rounds in the ring with George Foreman. (Before he endorsed The Grill!) “Allow one month prior to an occasion for healing and touch ups. I lean toward hyaluronic acid fillers such as Restylane, Juvederm and Perlane because they are easily reversed with Hyaluronidase. This product dissolves and degrades those fillers should an undesirable result occurs.”

Of course, any filler treatment needs to be done carefully, conservatively and only by very experienced and Board Certified specialists. “Before picking up the Restylane syringe, good dermatologists and plastic surgeons look at you long and hard evaluating your 1) skin quality and texture, 2) tissue tone and thickness, 3) cheek and lip volume, 4) bone structure and 5) how your face looks when animated and how it looks when still. A knowledgeable injector will avoid pitfalls such as these: adding volume to deep set eyes can recess the eyes further and make them look smaller; over-inflating nasolabial folds and marionette lines can take away mid-face structure; and overfilling cheeks can make the under-eye area appear hollow.”

Aside from these emergency fixes, looking good, of course, is not a one day event like a clearance sale. If you watch what you eat, drink, apply and think, you are practically guaranteed to look Better Than Before.