

Cortisol Face Is All Over TikTok—Is It a Real Medical Condition?

- *People on TikTok are talking about “cortisol face.”*
- *People on social media say that the condition is reportedly caused by higher levels of stress.*
- *Doctors share if they think there’s any validity to the condition.*

There’s never been a better time to learn about beauty and health, but all that information swirling out there requires some serious fact-checking. The latest info-trend raising questions is cortisol face.

What is cortisol face? Several people on TikTok are [warning](#) about it, claiming that “cortisol face” or “moon face,” happens due to high levels of the stress hormone cortisol. This can lead to a round, puffy appearance, some claim.

In case you’re not familiar with it, cortisol is a [steroid hormone](#) produced by the adrenal glands. Cortisol plays a role in various processes in the body, including regulating the body’s stress response, controlling metabolism, suppressing [inflammation](#), and controlling the sleep-wake cycle, according to the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#).

Meet the experts: [Cindy Wassef, M.D.](#), an associate professor at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School; [Ife J. Rodney, M.D.](#), founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics; [Luma Ghalib, M.D.](#), an endocrinologist and associate professor at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and College of Medicine; [Christoph Buettner, M.D., Ph.D.](#), chief of the division of endocrinology at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School; [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist practicing in New York City

But while cortisol is a real thing and facial puffiness happens, are the two actually linked? Endocrinologists and dermatologists explain, plus whether stress actually plays a role in this.

What is cortisol face?

Since it is not a diagnosis, there is no clear definition for what, exactly, cortisol face is. However, the general consensus is that cortisol face happens when you have higher levels of cortisol swirling around your body. Still, “cortisol face is not a real medical condition,” says [Cindy Wassef, M.D.](#), an associate professor at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

Cortisol is released in your body when you experience stress, including acute and chronic stress, says [Ife J. Rodney, M.D.](#), founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics.

What many people claim on social media is that when you’re dealing with higher levels of stress, or chronic stress, it can cause your face to look puffier.

What causes cortisol face?

Several people claim that higher levels of cortisol in your body from stress will cause cortisol face, but that’s not entirely true. Instead, these are some of the main reasons why you may be dealing with symptoms of cortisol face.

Cushing’s syndrome

There is a rare medical condition called Cushing syndrome that’s linked with excessive circulating cortisol, points out [Luma Ghalib, M.D.](#), an endocrinologist and associate professor at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and College of Medicine. In people with Cushing syndrome, “too much cortisol leads to a more rounded face, pinkish red cheeks, thinner skin with easy bruises, a puffy neck, and a worsening upper back hump,” Dr. Ghalib says.

But Dr. Buettner points out that Cushing syndrome is rare and is highly unlikely to *just* cause a rounded face. “To claim that an isolated round face without these other symptoms is caused by Cushing disease is wrong,” he says.

“Stress doesn’t just manifest as high cortisol,” says [Christoph Buettner, M.D., Ph.D.](#), chief of the division of endocrinology at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. “Stress also raises other hormones [in the body].”

But, the following things may affect your facial appearance:

Certain medications

Just being stressed out is unlikely to change the shape of your face, Dr. Rodney says. However, taking high levels of corticosteroids—i.e. medication—can lead to a phenomenon called “moon face,” where someone will develop a rounder-than-usual face, points out [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist practicing in New York City.

“You can get that from extremely high corticosteroid levels from taking steroids for a medical condition,” Dr. Rodney says. “But having very high general stress levels is different.”

Diet changes

If someone is stressed, they may eat more than usual—and that could also lead to a rounder face, Dr. Buettner says. “Is this then due to the cortisol because you’re stressed? No, it’s because you ate too much and you were stressed,” he says.

But dietary changes can lead to water retention, inflammation, and poor skin appearance, Dr. Goldenberg says. “Diets high in fats, especially vegetable oils, cause inflammatory damage, accelerating skin aging and contributing to a less defined facial contour over time,” he says. “Refined sugar and simple carbohydrates can spike blood sugar and promote inflammation or bloating, exacerbating facial fullness.”

Sodium and water retention

This varies from person to person, but [research](#) has found that people will pass more sodium in their pee when they're stressed, while other people will hold onto more sodium when they feel frazzled. If you couple that with a high-sodium diet, there's a chance you could look a little puffier than usual, Dr. Rodney says—it's just not a given. But high sodium foods alone can cause puffiness, Dr. Goldenberg points out. "High-sodium foods can cause the body to retain water, leading to temporary swelling and a puffier face, as excess salt draws fluid into tissues," he says.

Can stress alone cause cortisol face?

The underlying theme in a lot of those TikTok warnings about cortisol face is that cortisol face is caused by stress and reducing your stress levels can tamp down on your facial puffiness. But doctors say that's not accurate.

"Stress alone cannot cause cortisol face puffiness," Dr. Goldenberg says. "This is typically caused by a medical condition." While having normal or even extreme levels of stress can lead to bodily inflammation and fluid retention, it's not enough to create the big changes you'd see if had Cushing's syndrome or took certain medications, he says.

Dr. Wassef agrees. "While emotional or life stress may cause an increase in cortisol, it would not be high enough to see these effects," she says.

Signs of cortisol face

Cortisol face, according to TikTok, means having a puffy, rounded face. But doctors say that it's possible that being perpetually stressed can also impact your face.

"Stress hormones have also been shown to make the skin look older, and to decrease levels of collagen and elastin that can create a more youthful appearance," Dr. Goldenberg says.

Stressful situations can also lead to other behavioral changes that can impact the appearance of your face, including disrupted sleep, which can raise the risk of developing under-eye circles and facial puffiness, Dr. Wassef says.

When to see a doctor

If you're dealing with symptoms that could be categorized as "cortisol face," it's important not to ignore them. "If you have sudden onset of facial puffiness or if it persists, see your doctor," Dr. Goldenberg says. They can evaluate everything from your diet to your hormone levels to see what could be behind this change, and suggest a solution from there.

Cortisol face treatments

Again, cortisol face isn't a medical term. With that, there are no clearly defined treatments.

However, if you find that you're dealing with a puffy face and it's a new and persistent thing for you, Dr. Buettner recommends contacting your primary care physician for an evaluation. It could be due to something easily fixable, like having a lot of salt in your diet, or it could be a sign of something more serious, like Cushing syndrome (although, again, it's more likely that you'll have other symptoms along with a rounder face).

If your doctor suspects that you have Cushing syndrome, they can order a range of testing, including a 24-hour urine collection test, a saliva test, and a blood test, according to the [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases](#) (NIDDK). From there, they can get a good idea of what's happening with cortisol levels in your body, along with other hormones.

Still, doctors say that you shouldn't jump to conclusions with this. "There are a bunch of things that can lead to puffiness in your skin," Dr. Rodney says. "I just wouldn't pin it on stress."

Bottom line

Cortisol face isn't an actual medical diagnosis, but it's possible to develop a puffy, round face for a slew of medical reasons. If you're dealing with a puffier-than-usual face and you're not sure why, contact your healthcare provider. They should be able to give you an assessment to help you get answers.

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