SKIN CARE

The Hidden Cost of Mistaking Rosacea for Acne

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When red spots and bumps appear on the skin, they are often mistaken for acne. However, not every breakout is acne. In some cases, these symptoms may indicate rosacea, a chronic inflammatory skin condition, often mistaken for acne due to its similar appearance.

Although acne and rosacea may present with similar symptoms, including facial redness, papules, and pustules, they are clinically distinct disorders. Their overlapping appearance often leads patients to mistake one condition for the other, highlighting the importance of accurate diagnosis and appropriate management.

Understanding Acne Vulgaris

Acne vulgaris, commonly known as acne, is a chronic inflammatory skin condition that occurs when hair follicles become clogged with excess sebum (oil) and dead skin cells. This blockage can lead to the development of various lesions, including blackheads, papules, pustules, and nodules.

Acne most commonly affects the face, but it can also occur on the neck, chest, shoulders, upper arms, and back, which are areas of the body with a high concentration of sebaceous glands.

Although acne is most common during adolescence due to hormonal changes associated with puberty, it is not restricted to teenagers. Individuals of all age groups, including adults, can experience acne.

Understanding Rosacea

Rosacea is a common chronic inflammatory disorder characterised by recurrent flushing, erythema (redness), visible blood vessels (telangiectasia), papules, or pustules on the nose, chin, cheeks, and forehead.

Unlike acne, rosacea does not typically involve blackheads or whiteheads. This condition often follows up with flare-ups and remissions, symptoms triggered by factors such as sun exposure, stress, spicy food, hot beverages, alcohol and extreme temperatures.

Although rosacea can affect individuals of any age, it is most frequently diagnosed in adults between the ages of 30 and 50 years.

Why is Misdiagnosis Common?

The misdiagnosis of rosacea as acne is common because both conditions can present with similar visible symptoms. Facial redness, inflamed bumps, papules, and pustules are characteristic features of both disorders, making it difficult for patients to distinguish between them based on appearance alone.

Many individuals associate any facial breakouts with acne, increasing the risk of self-diagnosis and the use of over-the-counter acne treatments. However, without a proper diagnosis, such treatments may be ineffective and can potentially worsen skin irritation, particularly in individuals with rosacea.

For example, topical medications containing benzoyl peroxide or retinoids, which are commonly used to treat acne, may aggravate rosacea symptoms, leading to increased redness and sensitivity.

The rise of online skincare advice and social media trends has also contributed to confusion. Most of the patients blindly believe the social media advice, which can further delay appropriate treatments, especially in the case of rosacea, which can be harmful if left untreated.

Therefore, understanding the subtle differences between acne and rosacea is essential for ensuring accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

Clinical Differences of Acne and Rosacea

Although acne and rosacea can have similar symptoms, several features can help differentiate the two conditions.

Areas affected: Acne commonly affects the face, chest, back, shoulders, and upper arms, whereas rosacea primarily affects the central face, particularly the cheeks and nose, which may spread to the chin or forehead.

Skin lesions: Blackheads and whiteheads are seen in acne but are typically absent in rosacea.

Redness: Rosacea is often associated with persistent redness and flushing, while redness in acne is usually limited to inflamed lesions.

Age of onset: Acne is most common during adolescence, whereas rosacea is more frequently diagnosed in adults.

Triggers: Rosacea flare-ups may be triggered by sunlight, spicy foods, alcohol, and stress, while acne is more commonly influenced by hormonal changes, excess sebum production, and genetics.

How Can an Accurate Diagnosis Be Achieved?

Obtaining an accurate diagnosis is essential for the effective treatment and management of skin disorders. The skin, particularly that of the face, is highly sensitive and may react adversely to inappropriate treatments. Therefore, relying only on self-diagnosis can increase the risk of worsening symptoms and delaying appropriate care.

A thorough clinical examination by a dermatologist can help accurately identify the underlying condition by assessing the patient’s symptoms and medical history. Based on this evaluation, an appropriate treatment plan can be recommended.

This highlights the importance of seeking professional medical advice rather than relying on self-diagnosis. Early consultation with a dermatologist can facilitate timely intervention, prevent symptom progression, and improve overall treatment outcomes.

Looking Beyond The Breakout

Not every breakout tells the same story. While acne and rosacea may share similar signs, understanding the differences between them is crucial for proper treatment and care. Looking beyond the visible symptoms and seeking

an accurate diagnosis can help patients avoid unnecessary skin damage and receive the treatment best suited to their condition.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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