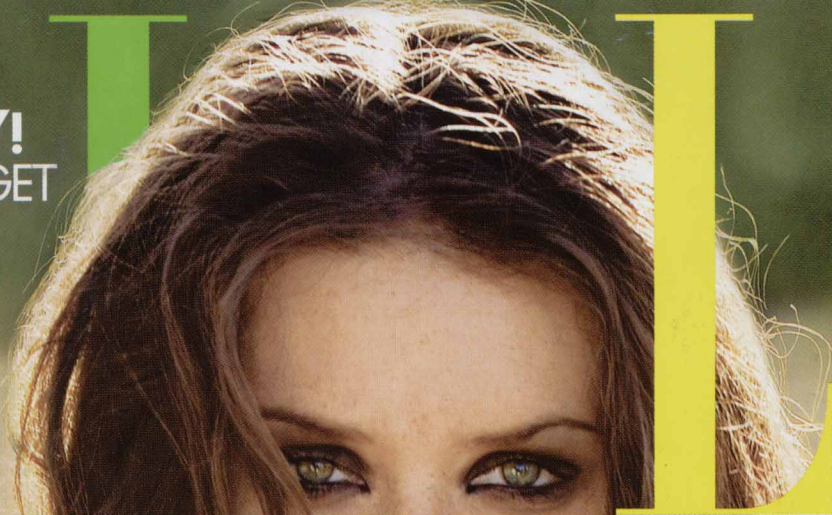


**FINALLY!**  
HOW TO GET  
**CLEAR  
SKIN**  
FOREVER  
& EVER



MAY 2006

## ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS FACE

OUR BEAUTY ADVENTURESS HAD A PROBLEM: SHE COULDN'T STOP HER BREAKOUTS AND SHE COULDN'T STOP PICKING AT HER SKIN. COULD MIND/BODY SKIN SPECIALISTS HELP CLEAR UP HER ACNE AND HER PSYCHE? BY HOLLY MILLEA

**F**orget the Middle East. Forget Alaska. The great, untapped oil reserve is hiding in plain sight on the Upper East Side of Manhattan: my face. For years I've managed to keep it secret, but due to a recent increase in production,

telltale pimples have been popping up. Their single day output alone could fuel *Air Force One* to Iraq and back with enough left over to fill Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hummer and dress a Martha Stewart salad. Of course, this means my life could be in danger.





Fearing a military invasion of my studio apartment, I don a Jessica Simpson mask, and—after triple-checking that I'm not being followed by anyone other than the staff of *US Weekly*—take a subway to my Anti-Acne Operative, dermatologist Dennis Gross, MD.

For 10 years I've been going to Gross, and now he can read my pimples like tea leaves. "Stress, hormones, poor product selection," he says, examining my skin through a magnifying glass. "Oh, and you're being pursued by someone with the initials C.I.A." I knew it! I beg Gross to clear me up before I'm overtaken by the Bush administration and declared government property. (And they'd *still* make me pay taxes.)

"The combination of elements I mentioned is causing you to produce oil that is heavier and stickier, and it gets backed up and forms a cyst," Gross says, giving my largest lumps steroid injections. "When bacteria gets trapped behind the blockage it becomes pathogenic because it can grow like crazy in the warm cushy environment created by body heat and humidity." And what is this thing over here that looks sort of like a pimple, but doesn't act like a pimple, and never goes away? "That is a cousin of acne called sebaceous hyper-

antidepressants and hypnosis can be crucial to kicking the habit.

The need for control is a common component behind putting the squeeze on. "Another thing I see a lot is people who were picked on by others growing up," Grossbart says. "Being picked on becomes a pattern they continue by picking on themselves." He saw one woman who blamed her severe acne for not finding a steady relationship. It turns out she was aggravating her condition before every date as a subconscious way to emotionally protect herself. "The acne was an emotional and physical police officer in the sense that it kept men away," Grossbart says. "But once she worked out her fears, she left her face alone and it cleared up. Now she's married."

Some sufferers only pick at night, like Grossbart's patient who, as a teenager, would lie awake in bed listening to his parents fight "so that became his time to pick." Strangely enough, it can have a soothing aspect. "A lot of people go into a spacey trance state when they do it," Grossbart explains. "They think it's two minutes later and it's 20 minutes later." Ahem, that would be me. I even have a spacey trance stance and do a spacey trance dance and in my trance I go to France and read the books of Judith Krantz. That was fun!

Grossbart thinks picking at acne can be a kind of "fractional suicide," he says, "meaning, some people attack little pieces of themselves."

plasia. It's an overgrowth of the oil glands. I need to use the Smoothbeam laser to take care of that." He gives the bump a few zaps. "You have to be very careful doing this," Gross adds. "Any time you overtreat these glands it's possible to cause a depression in the skin. *There*, all gone. You'll have a red mark, but it fades in 10 days." Before I go, Gross writes me a prescription for minocycline (an oral antibiotic) and clindamycin topical gel. He also orders me to stop picking.

Like that's going to happen. Me, I pick at everything. I'll even pick at nothing until it's something. I've stuck sewing needles into pimples! Taking a cue from veterinarians, I strap a cone around my head to keep my fingers from reaching my face and call Ted Grossbart, PhD, on speakerphone. A clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School, Grossbart is the author of *Skin Deep: A Mind/Body Program for Healthy Skin*. He specializes in "psychodermatology"—the relationship between skin conditions and emotional disorders.

"People have gone from skin that would have been perfectly fine to being disfigured, to even life-threatening dangers, based on picking themselves," Grossbart says. "Anger is a key issue. If you did to somebody in the street what you do to yourself, they'd put you in jail." Sometimes the chronic picking that leads to scarring can be a kind of "fractional suicide," he says. "Meaning, some people attack little pieces of themselves. You treat it like self-destructive or suicidal impulses of any sort. To stop the behavior, you need to look at the underpinnings of the motive." And in severe cases,

Bottom line: "The skin becomes a player in underlying emotional issues," Grossbart says. "Work out the psychological stuff, and your skin can go back to being skin instead of a political football."

I take a pass on being psychoanalyzed—who has time?—and walk over to the Park Avenue office of Amy Wechsler, MD, a psychiatrist, dermatologist, and blond stunner, who quickly deduces part of my problem. "Your attention span is too short for any treatment that requires much work," she says. I'm sorry, could you repeat that? I was distracted by the screen saver on your computer. "You're like a teenager—they have no patience so you can only give them one thing to treat their acne." Compliance is a big problem at every age. Wechsler estimates that 20 to 50 percent of prescriptions are not even filled. And often the ones that are, aren't used. Like mine.

She tries to pare things down to one super product for patients like me. Good old benzoyl peroxide will do for the mild teen breakout. But when it comes to more complicated adult acne, Wechsler prescribes Retin-A cream or gel. There is, however, a downside. "It takes six to eight weeks to even start working," Wechsler says. "It takes that long to change the environment of sebaceous glands." People make the mistake of starting with a high dose of Retin-A, which irritates the skin and causes peeling and then they stop using it. "You should begin by using it two nights a week, low strength, pea-size amount," Wechsler advises. "Then you can



work up to using more, more often. That would keep acne like yours in check.”

Feeling the urge to purge, I pull out my high-tech anti-acne arsenal for Wechsler to yea or nay. First is the \$195 Clarisonic skin-care brush. Wechsler (and Gross) say it doesn't clean any better than a washcloth. “Wash your face with your hands, warm water, and mild soap,” Wechsler says. “You have to be gentle. Irritated skin makes more pimples. You don't want to be squeaky clean. You don't want to strip your skin of essential oils.”

My high-tech Zeno zit zapper elicits a “Wow!” from Wechsler. It's the size of an iPod mini and shaped like a lighter, with a metal-capped tip that heats up for two and a half minute intervals. The Zeno claims it can “clear up a pimple in just hours” by stimulating “a heat-shock response” in the bacteria.

“Now, there *is* a bacteria associated with acne called *P. acnes* [Propriobacterium acnes],” Wechsler says, “but this bacteria is only one of the causes of acne. Acne is multifactorial. That bacteria is around, but if you just kill it, you still

and blue marks using foundation thickened with loose translucent powder and a nylon paintbrush. Thank God.

Okay, so let's recap the idiocy: I zap my zits with the Zeno, I zap the Zeno dots with a laser, I erase the laser bruises with makeup which would have covered up the zits I had to begin with. Next time you see me, wear a T-shirt that reads I'M WITH STUPID.

The bruises don't budge for three days. Without Roldan's expert hand, I can't get them covered up. My brother Paul Millea, MD, an Eastern medicine practitioner, tells me to take Arnica 200c, a homeopathic remedy for bruising. Armenakas says to apply arnica gel as well. Four days later, I'm back to normal!

And back in Armenakas' office. All my picking over the years has left me with some scars. The Smoothbeam laser is a noninvasive way to correct them. Since it targets the dermis, not blood vessels, you don't have to worry about taking ibuprofen. “It penetrates deep into the skin and stimulates collagen production,” Armenakas explains. “But because it does so gently and slowly, it takes a series of treatments. You

“Skin is an organ,” Gross says. “There's a limit to the amount of injury it can recover from.”

have a pimple.” Looking at the Zeno booklet, Wechsler starts laughing. “It says it does not work on blackheads, whiteheads, nodular, or cystic acne. So you have to have a teeny little red papule. In which case you have a pimple on which anything would work. Leaving it alone would work!” For a month I gave the Zeno the old college try on zits of every size, shape, age, and political affiliation. They all voted to stay. (The ones I zapped the night before visiting Wechsler resulted in round red spots on my face.)

I thank the doctor and leave, enlightened, to have lunch with my friend, dermatologist Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas, MD, PhD, another amazing anti-acne activist. I explain my red polka dots and assure her I'm now Zenophobic. Trouble is, I've got to tape an HBO interview in two days with actor Paul Walker. And my producer won't let me wear my Jessica Simpson mask. “Come in tomorrow during lunch,” Armenakas says. “I'll run a pulse-dye laser over them to get the red out.”

The next day, I drop in. Zap, zap, zap...we both remove our goggles and I see the blood drain from Armenakas' face. “Uh-oh.” Uh-oh? What uh-oh? “Holly,” Armenakas says. “Did you take ibuprofen within the last 24 hours?” Uh, yeah. “Well, it's a blood thinner and I'm now watching you bruise right before my eyes.” I grab a mirror. Omigod! I look like I've been quail hunting with Dick Cheney!

When I arrive on set my producer's jaw hits the sidewalk. Toni Lee Roldan, the makeup artist, grabs her camera: “Oh baby, I need before and after shots. If I get this covered up, I'll book more work than I can handle.” One hour and 20 minutes later, Roldan painstakingly erased a dozen black

need at least three before you can really see a difference.” Starting at \$300 each.

Gross is big on the Smoothbeam too. “Not only can it even out depression scars, it can actually shrink the oil-producing glands, and shrink pores,” he says. Hearing of my acne adventures (and misadventures), Gross gives me a wake-up call. “Skin is an organ,” he says. “Like any other organ, there's a limitation as to how much injury it can recover from, because every injury taps into the biological reserve. Remember when you underwent that coblation debacle?” Yes, I still have the white hyperpigmentation scars. “Even though you look like you're fully recovered, you can fail to heal with future additional injury because the skin is depleted of its ability to heal itself. You have to be careful, my dear.” How scary is that?

Nevertheless, Gross says I can undergo Smoothbeam treatments without worry. But I should be realistic about my expectations. “You have to understand where you are in the spectrum of severity,” he says. “Someone with severe scarring will get a 50 percent improvement and that is huge! But in minor cases, you may need more than that to be happy with the results.” Hey, a little improvement is better than none.

In the end, not having new zits to pick has upped my face value. I got a jump start on the clearing process by actually using my minocycline antibiotics; I dot clindamycin gel on existing pimples in the morning; at night I apply Retin-A. Now that I'm getting my acne under control, I'm not going to be picky about anything. Which leaves me with a question: What to do with my spacey-trance pants? □