

► Rosacea

BY CHRISTEN BROWNLEE

What if the rosy blush from a brisk walk outside or from a touch of the sun just stayed there—would it be so attractive? For the sufferers of rosacea, an acnelike skin disorder that affects approximately 14 million people in the United States, the blush is a permanent redness of the face that eventually progresses to include unsightly visible blood vessels, bumps and pimples, bloodshot eyes, and a bulbous, enlarged nose.

Rosacea usually appears in middle age as a flush that comes and goes in response to individual triggers. It is diagnosed more often in women than men, but men tend to experience more severe symptoms, perhaps because they often delay seeking treatment until advanced stages of the disorder. Rosacea is chronic and progressive—and individuals who do not keep it under control can expect symptoms to worsen throughout their lifetimes.

Many sufferers confuse rosacea with sunburn damage or adult acne, but it is a different disorder. Its exact causes are unknown, but researchers have developed many theories. Some believe that rosacea is a component of a more generalized disorder of the blood vessels, explaining the tendency to flush—however, this theory does not explain the pimples and additional skin tissue that some sufferers develop. Other theories involve changes in normal skin bacteria or an infection of the stomach by the ulcer-causing bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*. Skin mites, fungus, or a malfunction of connective tissue under the skin have also been blamed.

While rosacea is not contagious, some evidence suggests it might be hereditary. According to a survey by the National Rosacea Society, a nonprofit organization that funds research and provides support for rosacea patients, nearly 40% of sufferers have a relative with rosacea symptoms. And a separate survey by the society found that many rosacea patients share a similar ethnicity—33% of responders reported having at least one parent of Irish heritage, and 27% had a parent of English descent. These findings might support a hereditary origin, but they could also be coincidental—while these patients' family lines can be traced to similar regions in Europe,

most people from these regions tend to be fair-skinned, as do most rosacea sufferers.

Researchers have found that the key to slowing progression and avoiding flare-ups is to prevent flushing. Many rosacea patients report that certain triggers affect their symptoms. These triggers often cause normal flushing in healthy people; however, the flush that signals the beginning of rosacea lingers for hours or days. Triggers include sun exposure and hot weather, consuming alcohol or spicy foods, using irritating skin-care products, and the stress of daily life. Many doctors advise patients to keep “trigger diaries” to record events that preceded flare-ups. Patients can then identify and avoid such events in the future.

As symptoms worsen, blushes extend and the complexion becomes permanently ruddier. Tiny blood vessels become visible on the cheeks and especially around the nose. Eventually, the face becomes inflamed in patches with bumps of excess tissue and pimples, similar in appearance to a bad case of teenage acne. More

men than women experience a symptom known as rhinophyma—enlargement of nose tissues.

Doctors usually prescribe initial treatment with oral and topical antibiotics, followed by long-term use of the topical therapy to keep symptoms in check. The most popular prescription for the latter is metronidazole. Researchers are not certain why antibiotics are effective in keeping rosacea in check. To reduce

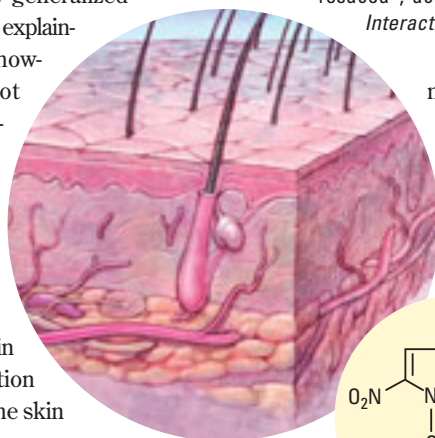
extensive redness and eliminate visible blood vessels, sometimes doctors recommend treatment with lasers or intense pulsed-light sources. Rhinophyma can be eliminated with plastic surgery.

With such a drastic and conspicuous change in appearance, some sufferers are affected psychologically as well as physically. Rosacea patients often report embarrassment, a drop in self-esteem, frustration, and depression. Medical therapy can improve the psychological health of patients—after treatment, 70% of patients feel an increase in emotional well-being.

Although rosacea might be socially debilitating to some, many have overcome the anxiety caused by the condition to achieve fame. Some well-known suspected rosacea sufferers include former president Bill Clinton, comedian W. C. Fields, and the 17th-century Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn. ■



Rembrandt's self-portrait “suggests a diagnosis of rosacea”, according to an article in *Lancet Interactive* (Dec 20, 1997).



Cross section of normal skin.

