

food for thought

Want to banish breakouts? A new study may reveal the best foods to eat for a clear complexion. Photographed by James Wojcik.

Scientific research may have debunked the long-standing myth that foods such as chocolate, pizza, and french fries cause pimples. But you may not be home free just yet. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* eating certain types of food—namely, carbohydrates with a high glycemic index—may hinder your ability to heal from breakouts. The glycemic index measures how quickly food is converted into glucose, an energy source for the body. Foods that are high-glycemic include carb-heavy teen favorites like bagels, pretzels, potatoes, and packaged cookies and cakes. "Foods that have a high glycemic index cause your blood sugar to rise rapidly," explains Sarah Armstrong, M.D., director of the Healthy Lifestyles Program at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina. "whereas lower-glycemic-index foods, like whole-grain breads, brown rice

and vegetables, require more processing in our stomachs to convert to glucose, so you get a slower increase in blood sugar."

In the study, the young male participants who adopted a low-glycemic-index diet balanced with a high-protein source (like chicken or fish) showed close to a 50 percent overall reduction in pimples after three months. Girls are likely to experience similar results, experts say, since blood-sugar-spiking foods affect skin in both males and females by influencing the body's hormones. "When you eat high-glycemic foods, blood sugar quickly rises," notes Diane Berson, M.D., a professor of dermatology at Weill Medical College of Cornell University in New York City. "Your body then responds with an increased release of insulin. The rise in insulin is accompanied by an increase in androgens, a type of male hormone, which stimulates sebum [an oily substance secreted by glands in the skin] production and possibly results in a thickening of the pore lining." Both conditions can then lead to clogged skin, making acne harder to tackle.

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But, warns Manhattan-based dermatologist Jody Levine, M.D., keep this information in perspective: "Converting to a low-glycemic index diet alone will probably not be the miracle cure for all of your breakouts. Remember, hormonal shifts in your body which can come every month with your period—also play a part in acne." In addition, says Armstrong, there are innate differences in how people's bodies react to high-glycemic-index foods. "Not everyone will see their complexion improve by converting to a low-glycemic diet. But that doesn't mean you should keep eating a lot of high-glycemic foods! They aren't good for anyone," she stresses. Indeed, studies show that consuming a large amount of these foods has been linked to an increased risk for becoming overweight, as well as developing diabetes and heart disease.

So how can you adopt a more skin- and body-friendly diet? First, look at the glycemic index as a general guide and not the final word on what to eat. For example, some candies may have a low glycemic index, but they're hardly good for you. Next, begin by making healthy substitutions. "Let's say you like fast food, such as burgers and fries," says Armstrong. "Have a fresh sandwich and baked chips instead. Or drink a diet soda in place of a regular one. Yes, sugary beverages are also a high-glycemic food!" Another tip to ensure that you have a well-balanced, low-glycemic-index meal is to divide your plate into quarters: "One quarter should be a protein," advises Armstrong. "Another should be a whole-grain, complex carb, like whole-wheat pasta; and the remaining two quarters of the plate should be filled with fruits and veggies." While further studies need to be done to fully uncover how food affects acne, there's no question that eating better will only boost your chances of getting in the clear. —JANE SHIN PARK