

Women's Health

Is “Cortisol Face” Real? Doctors Sound Off On The TikTok Trend

It's not as common as social media is making you think.

BY DANIELLE JACKSON

OCT 30, 2024



Have you noticed **your face looking swollen** or slightly bloated lately? Don't freak—there are many reasons this can happen, and the effects are usually temporary. But if you've spent any time on TikTok lately, you may be convinced that you have what influencers are calling "cortisol face."

Meet the experts:

Sean Alemi, MD, FACS, is a board-certified facial plastic surgeon

First, what is cortisol?

"Cortisol, also known as the 'stress hormone' is produced by the adrenal glands," says [Molly McBride](#), MD, an obstetrician-gynecologist (OB/GYN) at [PFRANKMD](#). "It plays a role in the body's response to stress, metabolism, and immunity." While the term "stress hormone" has a decidedly negative connotation, board-certified facial plastic surgeon [Sean Alemi, MD, FACS](#), assures that cortisol is actually an essential element for many normal bodily functions.

"While stress triggers cortisol levels to rise, this isn't necessarily a bad thing—increased cortisol during a stressful event actually helps you stay alert by increasing blood sugar and enhancing your brain's utilization of glucose," he says. "So, while cortisol often gets a bad rep, it's only problematic when it remains high for a very long period of time."

What actually *does* cause facial puffiness?

Turns out, there is real term for a chronically fuller-looking face: cushingoid face or 'moon face.' It's mostly associated with [Cushing syndrome](#), a hormonal disorder that can result in weight gain, inflammation, and significant facial swelling. "This is a rare medical condition that requires a diagnosis, and can be caused by taking large doses of steroid medications or benign tumors that are secreting steroid hormones," [Dr. Alemi](#) adds.

Aside from this official diagnosis, there are a variety of lifestyle factors that can also give the illusion of a fuller face, including lack of sleep, medications, and poor diet, according to cosmetic dermatologist [Paul Jarrod Frank](#), MD. [Dr. Alemi](#) adds that ultra-processed and sugary foods and drinks (like alcohol) can also cause the face to temporarily swell, so it's important to keep an eye on your diet if this is a common issue for you. "If you are noticing a puffer face, get more sleep, drink more water, and try a healthy diet of protein and vegetables," says Dr. McBride. "If your symptoms are persistent, seek medical advice to rule out a more serious issue."

Can I lower my cortisol levels?

The bottom line: being able to tell if a fuller, rounder face is a side effect of cortisol isn't something you'd be able to discern just by looking at yourself, per [Dr. Alemi](#)—so stop listening to TikTok and go see your doctor if you truly feel like something may be off. "If you feel that your face has become rounder-looking and swollen, but your body weight and body composition have otherwise remained stable, you should seek the advice of medical professionals to get at what's really causing your facial swelling," he says.