QUESTION: "I am the parent of a vegetarian college student who has terrible acne. Can this be related to her diet?" M.T., via e-mail

ANSWER: Food's role in acne is a controversial topic. There is no evidence that foods like chocolate or pizza affect acne, although some individuals notice that there is a connection for them. One possible explanation is that many students eat more pizza and chocolate during times when they're stressed (such as exam week, maybe). Stress, for some people, can trigger an outbreak of acne, so while it may look like pizza and chocolate are the culprits, it may actually be stress.

There are a couple of studies that support a role for certain foods in acne. One recent study did find that there was a connection between drinking cow's milk and acne. Girls who drank two or more glasses of milk a day had a higher risk of acne than did girls drinking less than a glass of milk per week. This held whether the milk was whole, lowfat, skim, or chocolate. Soymilk was not studied.

Another recent study found that avoiding foods that can cause a sharp increase in blood glucose (blood sugar) levels could help with acne. These foods include sodas, candy, sugar, white bread, and pasta. Replacing these foods with higher fiber and/or whole grain foods led to fewer symptoms of acne. Higher fiber foods would include fruits, vegetables, and dried beans, while whole grain foods would include whole wheat bread and whole wheat pasta.

Of course, if your daughter notices that certain foods do make her acne worse, she should avoid those foods.

Different foods, as well as different situations, can affect people differently. According to the National Institutes of Health (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000873.htm), acne can be made worse by a number of factors. One of these is changes in hormone levels—many women have outbreaks of acne around the time of their periods. Cosmetics or hair products that are very oily or greasy can lead to an outbreak of acne. High humidity or sweating can also make acne worse, as can some medications. Your daughter may want to discuss these possible triggers and her symptoms with her health care provider.

In addition, your daughter might want to schedule a visit to a registered dietitian to help her determine if her diet is nutritionally adequate or if it needs to be improved. Many colleges and universities have dietitians in the student health center.

REFERENCES