

Written evidence submitted by the British Skin Foundation (IBI0006)

The [British Skin Foundation](#) is a UK charity that funds research into all types of skin disease including skin cancer. Whilst our main mission is to fund research, we also raise awareness of issues surrounding skin disease. We know that the impact of skin conditions can have a profound impact on people's lives, therefore we have chosen to submit evidence on the impact of body image on physical and mental health following a 2021 survey.

One in five unhappy with their appearance, despite four in five believing it's important to wellbeing

During the summer of 2021, the British Skin Foundation surveyed 201 people with an appearance and skin themed survey. We found that almost one in five people (18%) were unhappy with their appearance, although more than four in five (83%) said their appearance is important to their general wellbeing.

As a charity that funds research into all types of skin disease, we were keen to focus on the skin side of body image and discovered that one in five (20%) were unhappy with their skin.

Attitudes towards accessing NHS GPs in relation to skin issues

Interestingly, only 44% would turn to their GP as a first point of call for advice with any skin problems with the next most common point of call being an internet search (18%), family member (12%), Consultant Dermatologist (11%), pharmacist (9%), friend (3%) or other medical professional (1%).

Worryingly, over a third of people (37%) had reservations about booking an appointment with their GP about a skin problem or condition. The main concern for more than half (62%) of those surveyed was that they might be wasting the GP's time.

At the British Skin Foundation, we know that skin disease can cause significant distress to a person's mental wellbeing, affect their personal relationships or work life as well as the physical pain, so it was shocking to learn that people with skin issues were reluctant to go to their GP for help.

Some of the other reasons people stated as why they were unwilling to contact their GP included the skin condition not being very serious (39%), believing that appointments could be better used for more serious conditions (38%), thinking they could solve the issue themselves (27%), GP only taking video or telephone appointments due to COVID-19 (27%), being scared of catching COVID-19 at the doctors (13%) or being reluctant to get public transport due to COVID-19 (3%). Almost half (47%) said that the reservations have increased since the pandemic.

Impact of skin conditions on a person's life

The skin is the body's largest organ and the first thing that others see daily, so if a person is unhappy with their skin, then it stands to reason this will affect their body image negatively. In our survey we asked those with skin problems currently or previously how it impacted their life.

Over a third (35%) confirmed that their skin condition affected their mental health, with a quarter saying they were often embarrassed by it (26%) and a quarter (25%) stating it affected their day-to-day life. Other notable ways people were affected including one in ten (11%) saying it affected their relationships, one in ten (11%) said their skin problems stopped them taking part in social activities 8% said it affected their work or career and 6% said it stopped them from having sex.

Judgement, shame, and stigmatisation associated with skin conditions

Over half (51%) of those surveyed by the British skin Foundation believe there is a shame associated with a skin condition or problem. It's clear from this statistic that many skin condition related issues are intrinsically linked to body image and how people perceive themselves and believe others see them.

When we asked people whether they felt judged by others in light of their skin condition or problem, again over half (53%) said yes.

More research needed to help those with skin conditions

From this survey it's clear than skin conditions play a huge part in body image, how people perceive themselves and believe other view them. Skin issues have the potential to severely affect a person's mental health, social life, relationships, work life and continue to bring up feelings of shame whilst at the same time not feeling important enough to approach a GP about in comparison with other illnesses. A final note to flag is that more than nine in ten people (92%) of those surveyed would welcome more research into all types of skin disease and skin cancer.

Previous works that support our 2021 appearance and skin survey

APPGS report

Back in September 2020, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Skin, led by Sir Edward Leigh MP, produced a report that revealed that there was a worrying lack of mental health support for skin disease patients. More than a dozen leading doctors, specialist nurses, and psychologists, specialising in dermatology and mental health led the report, as well as the dermatology specialist groups, the British Association of Dermatologists, the Primary Care Dermatology Society, the British Dermatological Nursing Group, and the British Psychological Society. Patient organisations and charities, including the British Skin Foundation were also involved in Working Group.

Reference: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Skin. 2020. *Mental Health and Skin Disease*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Skin. Available at http://www.appgs.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Mental_Health_and_Skin_Disease2020.pdf

Encyclopedia of Body Image & Human Appearance

Supporting quotes from Professor Andrew Thompson in the Encyclopedia of Body Image & Human Appearance.

The impact on body image of living with skin conditions:

“So arguably, the most obvious impact upon body image of living with a disease of the skin is the effect such conditions have upon visible appearance. Many skin diseases do give rise to permanent, temporary, or recurring ‘disfigurement’ – although this depends on the perception of both the beholder and beheld.”

The need for improvement in care for frontline public health staff:

“Awareness of body image issues needs to be a part of routine practice in dermatology and models of service delivery are needed that provide patients with an opportunity to receive a variety of psychological interventions in the clinic and to have access to linked specialist psychological interventions as required.”

Reference: Thompson AR. Skin Conditions. In: Thomas F. Cash, editor. *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, Vol 2. San Diego: Academic Press; 2012. pp. 738–744.

Free text responses from a UK survey on the psychosocial wellbeing of people with skin conditions and their experiences of accessing psychological support

The adverse psychological impact of skin conditions:

“It’s honestly soul destroying, it destroys every part of you physically and mentally.”

[respondent with atopic dermatitis]

On self-worth and body image:

“I feel so embarrassed to even go out, I feel I’m the ugliest”

[respondent with psoriasis]

As an obstacle to social and romantic intimacy:

“It’s hard to let anyone love you, look at you, kiss you etc when you feel and look disgusting.”

[respondent with psoriasis]

A demand for the clinical recognition of the psychological impact and lack of available and appropriate psychological support:

“We need more information about the help that is available, and greater understanding from GPs and not just another tub of cream to try and send you away.”

[respondent with psoriasis and rosacea]

Reference: Wheeler, M., Guterres, S., Bewley, A.P., Thompson, A.R., (2022). An Analysis of the qualitative responses from a UK survey of the psychosocial wellbeing of people with skin conditions and their experiences of accessing psychological support. *Clinical and Experimental Dermatology* **47**. pp 37-42.

About the BSF

The **British Skin Foundation** is the only UK charity dedicated to raising funds for all skin disease research including skin cancer. Our unwavering commitment to funding quality research means we won’t stop until we’ve found cures for common skin problems like eczema and acne through to potential killers like malignant melanoma. To date we’ve raised more than £17 million to fund over 400 research projects since 1996.

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