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When rosy is not so jolly; The famously pink cheeks and cherry-red nose. Is it possible Santa's suffering from rosacea? Color guard Green-tinted cosmetics can help mask skin's redness for those who suffer from rosacea.

By ANNA HANKS

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Published December 24, 2002

You'd recognize him anywhere, that Jolly old Saint Nick. He's visible a mile away in that crimson suit with the fetching fur trim. And, of course, there are those poinsettia-pink cheeks. His florid face was even immortalized in verse. As the classic poem points out . . .

"His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!"

But is it possible that Santa's permaflush indicates a potential medical problem? Could our beloved Yuletide icon have an untreated case of . . . rosacea?

Rosacea is a common, treatable skin condition affecting some 13 million Americans, according to the consumer health Web site www.about-rosacea.com. Despite the fact that it is usually not a medically serious complaint, the effects of rosacea on an individual's self-esteem can be very great, the site says.

The cause of rosacea is hard to pinpoint, but The American Academy of Dermatology says it can begin as flushing or blushing easily and progress to persistent facial redness. The redness can be mistaken as chapped skin, sunburn or an overly active blush.

"It's really in the same family as acne," said Dr. Delma Posey, chief of dermatology at Scott & White Clinic in Temple.

The symptoms

Rosacea causes broken blood vessels and inflammation around hair follicles, creating acne-like bumps. It also can cause a burning or stinging sensation.

In addition to the skin, rosacea may affect the eyes, resulting in a feeling of dryness or grittiness. In later stages, the nose can become involved — a condition called rhinophyma — resulting in a W.C. Fields- esque bulbous nose. It can eventually involve the ears, chest or back.

With his fair complexion, Santa falls into rosacea's high-risk group, but olive and dark-complected people also are at risk. The condition also seems to have a genetic component.

While Santa hasn't personally been into Posey's office, approximately 25 of the 600 patients he sees monthly are there for rosacea. Posey said most of his rosacea patients are in the earliest stage of the condition.

Clinton-esque

Besides Fields, other possible celebrity rosacea sufferers include the painter Rembrandt and former President Bill Clinton.

"Clinton was kind of the poster boy for rosacea," said Posey.

He said many people became more aware of the skin condition after the Clinton administration.

Waco aesthetician Robby Allen, who preforms facials at La Bella Visage salon, sees about two clients a month with possible rosacea.

"I'll ask them if they've seen a dermatologist," he said. Allen said he's had success in getting clients with possible rosacea to visit a dermatologist.

"If I suggest it, they pretty much get it checked up," he said.

Doctors are unsure of what causes rosacea, but they have an idea of what can trigger outbreaks. Excessive exposure to heat, such as hot drinks, extra-hard exercise, hot tubs or saunas are notorious for causing rosacea flare-ups. Alcohol and some skin care care products can also trigger problems.

While the condition isn't curable, it's treatable. Posey said rosacea management includes topical treatments such as MetroGel, or sulpha-containing lotions, or two or three months of oral antibiotics.

"It's now a lot more treatable than it used to be," said Dr. Brett J. Bolte, (a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation

) who treats rosacea with a KTP laser. The laser's selectively absorbed light is used to destroy veins, reducing the skin's reddened appearance. The procedure takes 35 to 45 minutes, and costs about \$250.

There are also cosmetic ways to make the redness less visible. Powders and concealers with a green tint can help mask the redness. In general, water-based cosmetics are recommended for sensitive rosacea faces.

If Santa were to visit the homes of Eastern practitioners, they might give him other insights into rosacea's cause and treatments. In a December 2002 article in

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