

What Can I Do About My Acne?

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What Is Acne?

Acne is a part of growing up. Nine out of ten teenagers will face acne (pun intended!). While acne can be embarrassing, it usually doesn't last into adulthood. Only rarely does it cause scarring. Girls and boys suffer from acne equally, though it usually starts in girls at an earlier age.

Acne usually occurs on the face, neck, shoulders, and sometimes the upper back. It is usually worse in the winter. Acne cannot be scrubbed away!

Acne is caused by overactive oil glands in the skin that become plugged, due to an increased level of hormones during the teen years. When the glands are plugged, they often also become infected, by a bacteria called Propionibacter.

Acne has no cure, but there are many things teens can do to reduce the number of zits, and limit or prevent scar formation.

Acne Is Not Caused By:

Junk foods, poor hygiene, dirt, sexual activity (or lack of!)

Acne Is Made Worse By:

Oil-based cosmetics, picking your face, stress, anabolic steroids, long oily hair, skin lotions & creams, greasy hands & air (fast food restaurants), lanolin, sesame oil, avocado oil, cocoa butter, coconut butter, vegetable oil, and sunscreens. Young women will often notice that their acne worsens just before their menstrual periods.

What Are The Different Kinds of Zits?

Open Comedones: "Blackheads"....they are not black from dirt, but from melanin

Closed Comedones: "Whiteheads"....may initially be flesh-colored, or turn red & tender

Nodulocystic Lesions: large, warm, tender, hard, and red lesions representing an abscess

Is My Acne Mild, Moderate or Severe?

- ◆ Mild: About one-fourth of the face has acne, and there are only a few red, tender zits, but no nodules or scarring.
- ◆ Moderate: About one-half of the face has acne. There are many red, tender zits, and possibly a few nodules or scars.
- ◆ Severe: Three-quarters or more of the face has acne. There are many red, tender zits and nodules, and often scarring is present.

The Must-Do's of Daily Acne Care:

- ◆ Be patient! It may be 6-8 weeks before improvement is noticed.
- ◆ Wash skin twice a day without scrubbing, using a gentle soap (Dove, Purpose, Caress, and Phisoderm are a few examples)
- ◆ Wash hair daily using oil-free shampoo & conditioner

- ◆ Use Benzoyl Peroxide 5% Gel (there are many different brands available over the counter, and generic is perfectly fine) at bedtime. Wash your face first, then wait 10-20 minutes before applying. A pea-sized amount should cover your whole face. Benzoyl Peroxide helps to open pimples and unplug blackheads, and kill the bacteria. At first, it might lead to dryness, irritation, or tingling. If your skin becomes red or peels, you are either using too much, using it too often, or using too high a concentration.

What Other Medications Are Available?

- ◆ Antibiotics: Since acne is partly due to infection, antibiotics can sometimes be helpful, especially if the zits are red and tender. These can only be prescribed by your doctor. There are pill forms and topical forms. The most commonly used topical antibiotics are Erythromycin and Clindamycin, available alone or in combination with Benzoyl Peroxide. However, such combination products can be expensive. If an antibiotic lotion or cream is used, you should still continue using Benzoyl Peroxide daily. Oral Tetracycline is another antibiotic option, prescribed as 500 milligrams twice daily taken on an empty stomach and with a large glass of water. It cannot be used under age 9 years. It is prescribed for 6-8 weeks bursts.
- ◆ Retinoic Acid: For example, Tretinoin. This is another effective agent that can be applied topically, and should be used along with Benzoyl Peroxide. Retinoic Acid is available to start in a 0.025% cream or a 0.01% gel. The gel works better, but may cause more skin irritation in the first few weeks of use. It is to be used every other or every third night. It may sting when you apply it. If you can get through the first few weeks, over 2-5 months Retinoic Acid almost always improves acne. Over time, your doctor may increase the concentration of the medication to a 0.05% or 0.1% cream, or to a 0.1% gel. You must avoid prolonged exposure to sunlight (> 30 minutes) while on this medication, and you must use water-based sunscreens for brief exposures (<30 minutes).
- ◆ Accutane: this is only prescribed for teens with severe acne, and only by a licensed dermatologist. It is considered the final treatment option for teens on whom nothing else has helped their acne. There are many potential side effects, and many precautions to taking it.