Acne

Acne is a skin disorder commonly associated with adolescents, however people of all ages can be affected by it. It is not uncommon for both men and women to experience acne during their twenties, thirties, and forties.

Although acne is rarely serious, it can cause scarring of the skin as well as psychological and emotional distress. With this in mind, it is important to know the facts about acne and how to properly treat this skin disorder.

What is acne?
Acne is a common skin disorder that occurs when hair follicles of the skin become plugged with sebum (an oily substance), dead skin cells, bacteria, or other debris.

What are the signs and symptoms of acne?
Acne usually affects the skin on the face, neck, chest, back, shoulders, and scalp. Characteristics of acne include:

- Blackhead (open comedo): Pores close to the skin’s surface that become clogged.
- Whitehead (closed comedo): Result of the accumulation of sebum deep below the skin’s surface.
- Pustule (pimple): Walls of a blocked hair follicle rupture. Inflammation occurs as a result of irritation caused by sebum, dead skin cells, and bacteria.
- Cyst: Forms deep in the skin and is usually a result of a more extensive infection.

What causes acne?
A number of factors can contribute to acne including:

1. Overactive oil glands
- Androgen, a hormone that is prominent in men, is produced by the adrenal glands and is responsible for the increased production of sebum and the enlargement of the oil glands, especially during puberty.

2. Blockage of skin pores
- Oil glands within the skin are responsible for producing sebum. Sebum is an oily substance that travels to the skin’s surface and is responsible for lubricating the hair follicles and surrounding the skin. However, when excess amounts of sebum are produced, pores become blocked and acne may develop. Dead skin cells that remain trapped beneath the skin may clog pores and cause acne.

3. Bacteria
- Acne is not caused by a bacterial infection. However, when oil is trapped under the skin, normal bacteria can grow in the clogged pores. These bacteria may alter the composition of the oil thus causing inflammation and irritation of the skin.

How is acne treated?
No single treatment is effective for everyone; therefore, the method of treatment will depend greatly on the individual needs of the affected person. Some treatment methods may include:

1. Mild soaps
- Mild soaps such as Ivory or Purpose can help keep the surface of the skin clean. However, because excess oil production takes place in the oil glands deep within the skin, abrasive scrubbing and over washing of the surface of the skin will not cure acne.

2. Topical agents
- Topical antibiotics, products with benzoyl peroxide, topical retinoids, and keratolytic agents can be used to kill bacteria as well as to unblock clogged pores.

3. Oral antibiotics
- Oral antibiotics, such as doxycycline, can be used to kill the bacteria on the surface of the skin, alter the composition of the excess oil produced in the oil glands, and reduce inflammation.

4. Hormone pills
- Certain hormone pills (e.g., birth control pills) have been shown to shrink oil glands, which in turn causes a decrease in the amount of oil production.

5. Other medications
- Other medications such as Accutane may be prescribed for severe cases of acne.

For more information contact the Nurse Line at OU Health Services, (405) 325-8732
Common myths and misconceptions

- Myth: Stress causes acne
  - Fact: Stress is not a direct cause of acne. However, stress does cause bodily reactions that increase oil production that in turn may cause acne.

- Myth: Chocolate and fried foods cause acne.
  - Fact: Research has not shown a positive correlation between acne and any type of food, including chocolate and fried food.

- Myth: Acne can be cured with frequent face washing.
  - Fact: It is good hygiene to wash the face on a daily basis. However, scrubbing, using abrasive cleaners, and over washing does not cure acne. Instead, these practices may irritate the skin and make the condition worse over time.

What are boils?

Boils are painful, pus filled bumps that form under the skin when Staphylococcus bacteria infect one or more of the hair follicles. This bacteria generally enters the skin through a cut, scratch, or break in skin. When this occurs, specialized white blood cells move to the site to fight the infection. This typically leads to inflammation and pus. Boils can occur anywhere on the skin, especially areas where sweat is likely (e.g., face, neck, armpits, buttocks, and thighs). It is not uncommon for boils to appear in clusters called carbuncles. Carbuncles often occur on the back of the neck, shoulders, or thighs and cause a deeper and more severe infection than a single boil.

What are the signs and symptoms of boils?

Usually boils will first appear as red, tender lumps about 1/2 inch in diameter. The surrounding skin may also be red and swollen. These lumps quickly fill with pus, making them grow larger and more painful. The boils finally develop a white tip that ruptures and drains. While some boils may disappear after a few days, most take about two weeks to completely heal. Small boils usually heal without scarring, but a larger boil may leave a scar.

What is the treatment for boils?

A health care provider may drain a large boil to help relieve pain, speed recovery, and lessen scarring. Antibiotics can be prescribed to relieve severe or recurrent infections.

When should one seek medical attention for a boil?

Most boils can be cared for at home. However, the following signs indicate that medical attention should be sought:

- Extreme pain
- Extremely large boils that have not healed within two weeks
- Boils accompanied by a fever
- Frequent boils
- Red lines radiating from a boil

Tips for prevention

- Thoroughly clean small cuts and scrapes
- Avoid constrictive clothing
- Eat a healthy diet
- Wash hands regularly
- Practice good hygiene — bathe daily
- Avoid sharing personal items like towels, razors, clothing, and athletic gear

References

- Gynecologic Health Center Women’s Health Interactive
- WebMD
- National Women’s Health Resource Center

What are the risk factors associated with boils?

Although anyone can develop boils, the following factors can increase one’s risk:

- Poor general health
- Diabetes
- Immunosuppressive medications
- Clothing that binds or chafes
- Other skin conditions