



Acne

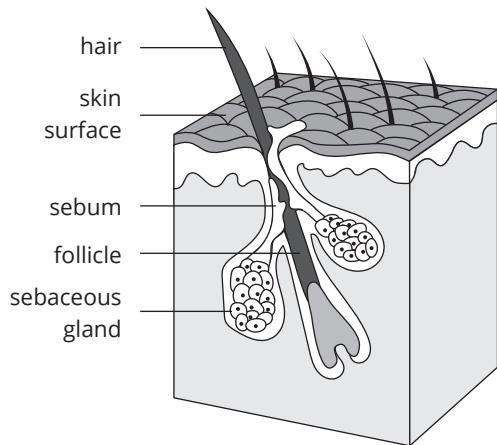
Self-Care



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Acne is a skin problem that affects up to 80% of teens and young adults and may range from an occasional pimple on the face to pimples, nodules, and cysts occurring on many areas of the body.

Acne begins when oil glands (called sebaceous glands) in the skin get plugged with dead skin cells, oily secretions called sebum, and hair. The sebum, or oil, can't reach the surface of the skin, and bacteria trapped in these plugs begin to multiply. The skin tries to open up this plug by sending in substances from the blood that cause inflammation. What results? A warm, red, raised, painful pimple. A **comedo** (an enlarged and plugged hair follicle) appears first. If it stays beneath the skin's surface, it develops a white bump called a **whitehead**. If it reaches the surface and contacts air, it becomes a **blackhead**. At that point, the comedo can get filled with pus, or deeper, larger bumps called **nodules** and cysts may form.



Acne usually begins in the early teen years, when the sebaceous glands of the skin (under the control of sex hormones) enlarge and make more oil. Acne occurs mainly on the face, neck, back, chest, and shoulders.

Myths about acne:

- Acne is not caused by poor hygiene. You cannot scrub the pimples away, and harsh alcohol-based astringents can irritate the skin and cause additional problems.
- There is no good evidence that acne is related to diet. No scientific data show that acne is caused by eating chocolate, pizza, soda, or other "junk" foods.

What can you do?

- Clean your skin gently with a mild cleanser. Scrubbing too hard makes acne worse; harsh soaps may cause irritation and dryness. Wash morning and evening and after any strenuous exercise. Blot the skin dry — do not rub vigorously.
- Wash your hair regularly (daily if you have oily hair or breakouts at the scalp line).
- Try not to touch or squeeze the pimples; this may spread inflammation and make things worse.
- Use caution when shaving. Men who shave should test both electric and safety razors to see which is more comfortable. When using a safety razor, make sure the blade is sharp and soften the beard thoroughly with soap and water before applying shaving cream. Shave gently and only when necessary to reduce the risk of nicking blemishes.
- Choose cosmetics and skin care products carefully. They should be oil-free and labeled "non-comedogenic" (doesn't clog pores). There are many products, including sunscreen, that are specifically for use on the face.

What about medication?

Health service staff can help you decide which treatments might work for you. Effective acne therapies are available to treat existing pimples and to prevent new ones from developing. Some treatments help reduce scarring and other skin changes caused by acne.

The targets for treatment are to:

- Stop abnormal clumping of skin cells in follicles
- Decrease oil production
- Fight the growth of bacteria
- Stop inflammation

Treatments available without a prescription:

Benzoyl Peroxide

- Destroys the bacteria involved in creating pimples
- May reduce oil

Resorcinol

- Helps break down whiteheads and blackheads

Salicylic Acid

- Helps break down whiteheads and blackheads
- Decreases shedding of cells that line hair follicles

Sulfur

- Helps break down whiteheads and blackheads

These products may be available in bar form, liquid washes, gels, and lotions. Follow the directions on the package. Use regularly but not more than twice a day. If irritation occurs, reduce how frequently you use the product. It may take six to eight weeks to see noticeable improvement.

Don't get discouraged!

Prescription treatments:

If the nonprescription treatments aren't doing enough, see a primary care clinician at your health service. He or she may prescribe:

Antibiotics

- Either applied to the skin or taken by mouth

Vitamin A Derivatives (called retinoids)

- Unplug comedones so antibiotics can reach their target
- Examples: tretinoin, adapalene, and tazarotene

Others

- May destroy bacteria and reduce oil production
- Examples: prescription strength benzoyl peroxide and azelaic acid
- Oral contraceptives, in some cases, may decrease acne in women

When to see a dermatologist (a skin specialist):

- If you have severe nodular or cystic acne
- If you have acne that doesn't respond to treatments listed here

For More Information

American Academy of Dermatology

(866) 503-SKIN (7546)

www.aad.org/acne

U.S. National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov/acne.html

American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

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