

ACNE

"Zits", pimples, blackheads, sores...- what doctors call "acne vulgaris" - can make the self-conscious age of adolescence even more awkward. At the first sign of a tell tale spot on your face, you fear the worst - your looks will be ruined, you'll be scarred for life, and no one will ever go out with you. Over 80% of teenagers develop some acne. Fortunately, most acne is mild and self-limiting without scarring and there is now treatment available to keep acne under control until this tendency is outgrown, usually by age 20 to 25.

Cause:

Everyone's skin is covered with little hairs ("peachfuzz"). Attached to the wall of the hair root under the skin is an oil gland. During adolescence, hormones stimulate the oil glands to secrete more oil. For some unknown reason, the pores for the hair and oil glands tend to become plugged. This plugging results in swollen, plugged oil glands, which you see as blackheads and white heads or what doctors call comedones. If this plugged gland then ruptures, the result is inflammation (redness) under the skin, causing pimples.

Bacteria live on everyone's skin and normally cause no problems. However, one type of bacteria converts bland normal oil to an irritating oil, and when these bacteria are trapped under the plugged pore, it worsens the inflammation in the skin. Thus, the treatment of acne involves keeping the "pores" open and reducing the number of bacteria on the skin.

Acne Facts:

1. Diet does not affect acne. Studies done with chocolate, cola, nuts, or fried foods have failed to show that these or other foods worsen acne.
2. Masturbation or sexual activity do not affect acne. Birth control pills sometimes improve acne but other times may make it worse.
3. Acne is not caused by dirt, nor from not washing enough.
4. Tension and anxiety may occasionally worsen acne.
5. While eating oily foods does not cause acne, getting oil or grease directly on the face may worsen acne. This may happen to teens who work with cars or machinery, or to those who work in a fast food restaurant with the deep fryer.
6. Most girls tolerate cosmetics, but some may not. If make-up is important to you, it may take some experimentation to find cosmetics that won't worsen your complexion. Most cosmetics made and marketed by large cosmetics firms in the United States are tested for acne and labeled as noncomedogenic (not causing comedones to form). Even when a cosmetic is so labeled, however, it should be used with care. Regardless of whether a cosmetic is labeled as noncomedogenic, if acne lesions appear after its use any future use should be avoided.

Treatment:

1. Shower or bathe daily and wash your face twice a day using a mild soap such as Dove, Camay, or Neutrogena. Using stronger soaps or more frequent washing may dry the skin too much so that it becomes difficult to use the prescribed acne medications.
2. Shampoo hair daily.
3. Avoid picking or squeezing pimples as this tends to increase scarring.
4. Use the medications that your doctor has prescribed:
 - a) Oral antibiotics (e.g. tetracycline, erythromycin, and minocycline): These are very safe even if taken for years. However, tetracycline may make you more prone to sunburn and vaginal yeast infections, and should not be taken during pregnancy. Be sure to drink at least an 8 ounce glass of water with each pill to avoid having it stay in the esophagus when you lie down and causing a burn.
 - b) Antibiotic lotions (e.g. Cleocin T, erythromycin): Apply to the face in the morning and before bed.
 - c) Benzoyl Peroxide: This is available in 2 1/2%, 5%, and 10% as a lotion, cream, or gel. Your doctor may start with a mild preparation and increase the strength and/or frequency of application as you skin becomes accustomed to it. It's more irritating on moist skin, so wait 15 to 30 minutes after washing to apply it. It may cause peeling at first, but don't stop using it unless your face becomes painful.
 - d) Tretinoin (Retin-A or Avita): This is also available in various strengths. It can usually be applied only once a day, or, if you have very sensitive skin, every other day. It should be applied 30 minutes after washing and very sparingly (i.e. 3 pea-sized dabs should cover the entire face.) It may also increase your tendency to sunburn. Do not apply Retin-A together with benzoyl peroxide; if both are prescribed, use the benzoyl peroxide in the morning, and the Retin-A before bed. Other drugs similar to Retin-A are adapalene (Differin), tazarotene (Tazorac) and azelaic acid (Azelex).

Prognosis:

Acne treatment does not generally have any effect on pimples that are already present, but will help prevent new ones. This is why **you may not see any improvement for the first 4 to 8 weeks**. Don't give up if you don't look better at first. It may turn out that you will need "stronger" medicine than originally prescribed, so be sure to make another appointment if you are not don't see improvement after 2 months or so. If the medications mentioned above do not help enough, there is another medications available called Accutane. Because this can cause significant side effects, it is only available from one of our dermatologists. An appointment will be arranged for you there if the other treatments are not helping. But remember, there is no magic cure for acne; it may be necessary to continue treatment for several years to keep it controlled.