

Acne—What You Need to Know

Acne is a common skin disorder that affects most adolescents and some adults. Acne generally appears as pimples or larger pustules on the face, chest, back and upper arms. Severe acne may cause scars. Acne usually goes away by the time a person becomes an adult. However, having acne causes emotional difficulties for many people.

What causes acne?

- Acne is not caused by dirt. Washing your face too often can irritate your skin and may make your acne worse. Wash your skin gently from the jawline to the hairline no more than twice daily with water alone or a mild, nonalkaline soap or soapless cleanser. Do not rub or scrub your skin and avoid rough washcloths.
- Acne is not caused by eating chocolate or greasy foods. However, you should try to eat a healthy, balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables. Cut down on fatty treats for your general health and choose low-glycemic options.
- Stress can make acne worse. Try to reduce stress through exercise or relaxation.
- Some medications and chemicals can cause acne. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have to take medicine daily or if you are exposed to chemicals at work.

How do you treat acne?

- Treat acne as soon as it appears to avoid complications such as scarring. Many different acne medications are available without a prescription.
- Ask a healthcare provider for advice about nonprescription acne medication. Some can irritate your skin or make your acne worse for a short time. Use the medication only once a day until your skin gets used to it.
- Use a nonprescription acne medication for 6–8 weeks. Remember, it may take some time before your skin looks better. Try not to get discouraged!
- Apply acne medication everywhere you have pimples. The medication will work better if you cover all the affected skin, not just the pimples. Use a clean cotton pad for each area that you are going to treat. Throw the pads away after using once.
- See your healthcare provider if
 - you have a lot of acne (pimples or large pustules).
 - you suspect your acne is being caused by a medical condition or by medicine that you have to take.
 - your acne has not improved after using nonprescription medication for 6–8 weeks.
 - you have a sudden change in the appearance or number of acne lesions.

Some Helpful Hints

- Do not use greasy cosmetics, coverstick, moisturizer, hair gel, scalp oil, eye cream or hairspray. All of these products can make your acne last longer—even if you only use them once.
- Do not use makeup regularly. If you must use makeup, choose an oil-free product that has the words “noncomedogenic” or “nonacnegenic” on the label. These words mean that the product will not cause acne. Remove all makeup carefully at bedtime.
- Wash your hair regularly. If you have oily hair, wash it more often. Keep your hair off your face as much as possible. Tie it back while you sleep.
- Do not pick, scratch, pop or squeeze your pimples. Cupping the chin in a hand can cause acne. It is best not to touch your skin at all if you can avoid it. If you have the habit of touching your skin, try to decrease this habit. You may want to keep a daily record of when you touch your skin to help you break this habit.
- Blackheads or whiteheads (comedones) can be removed with a “comedone extractor” (a tool to help press the blackhead out). The small end of a plastic eye dropper, without the bulb part, may also work. After cleaning the area with hot water, the comedone extractor is placed over the blackhead or whitehead and gentle pressure is applied until the contents are pressed out. This removes the blackhead or whitehead and may prevent it from becoming inflamed. If gentle pressure is not enough to remove the comedone, do not continue, as you will irritate the skin. Clean the comedone extractor with alcohol after each use. Blackheads and whiteheads may come back 25–50 days after removal. Treating the area of comedones with a peeling product for 4–6 weeks before using the comedone extractor may give a better result.
- If you shave, try both an electric razor and a safety razor to see which is more comfortable. If you use a safety razor, soften your beard with soap and warm water before you shave. Try to shave less often. Always

use a sharp blade and shave lightly. Shave over each area only once in the direction the hair grows.

- A tan can hide acne, but tanning can also damage your skin. To protect your skin, use an oil-free sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. An alcohol lotion or gel sunscreen is the best form for your skin. There are 2 main kinds of sunscreen: chemical and physical. Chemical sunscreens must be absorbed by the skin to be effective, so they should be applied after cleansing but before acne medication. Physical sunscreens (containing zinc or titanium) remain on the surface of the skin to reflect the sun and may stop acne medication from being absorbed (and being effective) if they are applied first, therefore, physical sunscreens should be applied after acne medication. If your acne medication contains benzoyl peroxide, do not use it at the same time as a sunscreen. Apply the sunscreen during the day and the benzoyl peroxide at night.
- Avoid humid environments.
- Wear clothing that allows the skin to breathe.
- Avoid or reduce exposure to environmental factors, such as dirt, dust, petroleum products, cooking oils or chemical irritants.
- If your skin is irritated by a headband, violin, chin strap, guitar strap or orthopedic braces, try cutting a sterile cotton pad to fit underneath.
- Avoid sports equipment such as sports helmets that rub against the skin with friction. If not possible, wear clean absorbent cotton garments or padding underneath equipment or uniforms.
- Follow these suggestions as long as you have acne. Remember to see your healthcare provider if the acne does not improve after 6–8 weeks of treatment.

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