



## Acne

### What is acne?

Acne is a skin condition that causes spots. Most people affected by acne are aged between twelve and twenty-five. However, a few men and women may continue to suffer intermittently into middle-age. There are many available treatments which can help deal with the condition.

Acne typically causes one or more of the following:

- blackheads (comedones)
- whiteheads
- red or yellow spots
- greasy skin
- scars

Acne usually affects the skin of the face, upper back, neck, chest and sometimes the arms. The severity of the condition can vary from very mild (just a few pimples) to moderate (many inflamed pustules) to severe (widespread deep nodules and cysts).

Acne affects people of all skin colours. The processes that cause acne are exactly the same whatever your skin colour but the impact is altered by the skin pigmentation.

### The skin

The surface of the skin has lots of small sebaceous glands just below the surface. These glands make an oily substance called sebum that is essential to keep the skin smooth and supple.

Tiny pores (holes in the skin) allow the sebum to come to the skin surface. Hairs also grow through these pores.

### What causes acne?

Acne is caused by the over-activity of the sebaceous glands that secrete oily substances onto the skin.

This occurs because the sebaceous glands of people with acne are especially sensitive to normal blood levels of testosterone, a hormone found naturally in both men and women.

In people prone to acne the testosterone causes the sebaceous glands to produce too much sebum. At the same time the dead skin cells lining the openings of the hair follicles are not shed properly and clog up the follicles. These two effects combined cause a build-up of oil in the hair follicles. This causes blackheads and whiteheads (pimples) to form.

For many people acne does not progress beyond this stage. However in some people, the build-up of oil in the hair follicles creates an ideal environment for a bacterium called *Propionibacterium acnes* (P.acnes) to grow.

These bacteria normally live harmlessly on your skin, but when this ideal environment is created their numbers rapidly increase. They feed off the sebum and produce substances that cause an inflammatory response from your body's immune system. This inflames the skin and creates the redness associated with spots (pustules).

In more severe 'inflammatory acne', cysts develop beneath the skin's surface. These acne cysts can rupture, spreading the infection into nearby skin tissue. This can result in scarring.

### **Acne myths**

Contrary to popular belief acne is not caused by:

- eating fatty food or chocolate
- dirt - blackheads get their dark colour through excess skin pigment not dirt, so washing more does not help, although if you do not wash your skin at all, bacteria will be able to multiply
- Acne is not contagious, so you cannot catch it.

### **What makes acne worse?**

There are a number of things that can make your acne worse :

- picking and squeezing the spots may cause further inflammation and scarring
- stress can make acne worse in some people, although it is not clear why
- in women, outbreaks may be affected by the hormonal changes that occur during the menstrual cycle
- excessive production of male hormones such as testosterone from conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome may be another cause.
- some contraceptive pills may make acne worse, whereas some other types of contraceptive pills can improve acne.
- some medicines can make acne worse. For example, some medicines taken for epilepsy, and steroid creams and ointments that are used for eczema. Do not stop a prescribed medicine if you suspect it is making your acne worse, but tell your GP. An alternative may be an option
- steroids tablets can also cause acne as a side-effect

## **Treatment**

Acne may cause you considerable emotional distress but there is a range of treatment options to help you tackle the problem. No treatment will completely 'cure' your acne. The aims of treatment are to prevent new spots forming, to improve those already present, and to prevent scarring.

## **Home treatment**

It is important to keep spot-prone areas clean, so wash the affected area twice a day with a non-perfumed cleanser. The skin needs a certain amount of oil to maintain its natural condition, so avoid aggressive washing with strong soaps.

There are a number of over-the-counter remedies available from pharmacies to treat mild acne. These usually contain antibacterial agents such as benzoyl peroxide. As well as its antibacterial effects, benzoyl peroxide can dry out the skin and encourage it to shed the surface layer of dead skin. Together, these effects make it harder for pores to become blocked and for infection to develop.

Benzoyl peroxide can cause redness and peeling, especially to start with. This tends to settle down if you reduce the number of times you use it. You can then build up your use gradually.

No home treatments for acne will work immediately. It can take weeks, if not months, for significant effects to be noticeable. If home treatments have not worked after two months, or you have severe acne, you should visit your GP. Prescription medicines

Your GP may start your treatment by prescribing a preparation containing benzoyl peroxide. If this does not work, or if you have more severe acne, there are a range of other treatment options that you can either rub onto your skin (topical) or take in tablet form (oral). Your GP will be able to advise you on these.

## **Further information**

British Association of Dermatologists  
020 7383 0266  
[www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)

Acne Support Group  
0870 870 2263  
[www.stopspots.org](http://www.stopspots.org)