

 Leaflet: Acne

# Acne

Acne is very common. Most people with acne are aged between 12 and 25 but some older and younger people can be affected. About 9 in 10 teenagers will develop some degree of acne. Untreated acne usually lasts about 4-5 years before settling. However, it can last for over 10 years in some people. Acne ranges from mild to severe but in most people it can be treated.

## What causes acne?

Small glands (sebaceous glands) lie just under the skin surface. These glands make the 'oil' (sebum) that keeps the skin supple and smooth. Tiny pores (holes) on the skin normally allow the sebum to come onto the skin surface. The cause of acne is thought to be as follows.

- ◆ *The amount of sebum is increased* in the teenage years. This is due to the hormone changes of puberty that stimulate the skin glands. As a rule, the more sebum that is made, the more greasy the skin feels and the worse acne is likely to be. Some people make more sebum than others.
- ◆ *Some pores become blocked.* This is due to the top layer of skin in the pores becoming thicker combined with dead skin cells that are shed into the pores.
- ◆ *Sebum collects under blocked pores* which swell to cause blackheads and whiteheads. These are small spots on the skin. The spots may enlarge into pimples (papules). Things may not progress beyond this stage. This is called mild non-inflammatory acne. (The black of the blackheads is due to skin pigment and is not dirt as is often thought).
- ◆ *Inflammation may develop around the blocked pores* . A bacterium (germ) called P.acnes lives and multiplies in the sebum of blocked pores. Inflammation is due to the immune system reacting to these bacteria and to some chemicals in the blocked sebum that leak into the surrounding skin tissue . This leads to skin redness and larger spots forming (pustules, nodules and cysts).

The face, arms, back, neck and chest are the common areas affected. This is where the sebaceous glands are largest. Inflamed acne spots eventually heal but can leave small scars.

- ◆ Acne is not caused by poor hygiene. In fact, many people with acne wash more than usual. They think that extra washing will help (but unfortunately it won't).
- ◆ Chocolate, fried foods, sweets or other foods do not cause acne.
- ◆ Acne is not contagious and is not just a simple skin infection.

## What makes acne worse?

- ◆ Some contraceptive pills may make acne worse. This is due to the hormones in some pills.
- ◆ The hormone changes around the female monthly period may cause a flare-up of spots.
- ◆ Stress is said to make acne worse in some people but this is difficult to prove.
- ◆ Thick, greasy make-up may possibly make acne worse. Make-up can be worn to cover spots but it is best to use non-greasy make-up and not to cover the face with foundation.
- ◆ Picking and squeezing the spots may cause further inflammation and scarring.
- ◆ Sweating heavily such as in hot humid countries or hot work may make acne worse. The extra sweat possibly contributes to blocking pores.
- ◆ Spots may develop under tight clothes such as headbands, tight bra straps, tight collars, etc. This is possibly due to increased sweating under tight clothing.
- ◆ Some medicines can make acne worse. For example, some medication for epilepsy and steroid creams and ointments often used for eczema. Do not stop a prescribed medicine but discuss with a doctor if you suspect one is making things worse.
- ◆ Anabolic steroids (taken illegally by some body-builders) can make acne worse.

## What is the aim of treatment for acne?

The aim of treatment is to clear spots as much as possible and prevent scarring. Treatments are usually effective if taken properly. They will usually clear most spots but there is no treatment that will clear the skin perfectly. There are different types of treatment that work in different ways including the following.

- ◆ Unplugging the blocked pores.
- ◆ Killing or reducing bacteria in the sebum and skin.
- ◆ Reducing skin inflammation.
- ◆ Preventing sebum being made.
- ◆ A combination of 2 or more of these effects.

## What are the treatment options for acne?

A doctor or pharmacist will advise on which treatment is best. This may depend on the severity and type of acne. For example, a topical treatment that works by unplugging pores may be advised if the acne is mainly blackheads and whiteheads with little inflammation. If skin inflammation develops then a treatment that reduces inflammation may be advised. The following are the main treatment types.

- ◆ *Topical treatments* - gels, lotions and creams are used for mild acne. They may also be used in combination with other treatments for moderate or severe acne. There are a variety available at the pharmacy and on prescription. Different preparations work in different ways. A common one available without a prescription is benzoyl peroxide. This has three actions - reduces bacteria, reduces inflammation and helps to unplug pores. Some topical treatments come in different strengths. A low strength is often advised first as topical treatments sometimes cause skin irritation.
- ◆ *Antibiotics* - are commonly prescribed for moderate or severe acne. Antibiotics kill the bacteria in the spots and reduce inflammation. A 3-6 month course will usually clear most spots.
- ◆ *Isotretinoin* - is a medicine that reduces the amount of sebum made by the skin glands. It is usually effective for severe acne. It may be advised by specialists only after other treatments have been tried without success. This is because there are possible serious side effects.
- ◆ *Hormone treatment* - one type of contraceptive pill (dianette) contains hormones that help reduce acne. This may be prescribed for women with acne who also want contraception.

## How long is treatment needed for?

Whatever treatment is used, it is normal to take 2-3 months for any improvement to be noticed and up to 3 to 8 months for most spots to clear. ***The most common reason why treatments fail is because some people think that treatment is not working after a month or so and give up***. It takes time for the inflammation to settle and fresh healthy skin to come through. Do persevere with any treatment for at least 2-3 months before deciding if it is working or not. If there is no improvement after 3 months of taking a treatment regularly and correctly, do not despair. A change to a different or more powerful treatment will usually be advised and is likely to work.

## Will acne return after treatment?

Acne commonly flares up again if treatment is stopped when the spots have cleared. Treatment may have to be taken for quite some time to stop acne flaring up again. A lower 'maintenance' dose is usually sufficient. It is common to need to take treatment for 4-5 years to keep acne away. In some people, 10 or more years of treatment is needed to keep acne away.

## Some other points about acne

- ◆ Wash the skin with normal soap and water. Do not wash more than normal (twice a day is usual). Do not scrub the skin harshly. Excess washing and scrubbing may cause more inflammation and possibly make acne worse. Antiseptic washes are heavily advertised but are unlikely to make any difference.
- ◆ You may prefer not to treat mild acne that is not inflamed (blackheads, whitheads and mild pimples). Mild acne is common and usually goes in time without scarring. However, inflamed acne can scar. If this develops it is best to seek treatment early to prevent scarring.
- ◆ Anxiety and depression are more common in people with acne. Do tell a doctor if you feel anxious or depressed about your acne.

## In summary

Acne is common but is usually treatable. Treatment needs to be taken for several months to clear spots. Inflamed acne needs to be treated early to prevent scarring. Once the spots are gone, treatment may still need to be taken for several years to keep acne away.

## Further help and advice

*The Acne Support Group*

1st Floor, Haward House, The Runway, South Ruislip, Middlesex, HA4 6SE

Tel: 020 8561 6868 Web: [www.m2w3.com/acne/](http://www.m2w3.com/acne/) & [www.stopspots.org](http://www.stopspots.org)

[Return to top](#)