

## Acne

### Overview

Spots, zits or pimples — whatever you choose to call them, they all come under the heading of Acne vulgaris, a common skin condition affecting up to 85% of people, mostly teenagers.

For most people it's a passing problem, but for others it can be severe and ongoing and result in scarring.

Sometimes the problems associated with acne can be more than skin deep — embarrassment because of the skin's appearance can result in emotional or psychological issues such as a lack of self-confidence, anxiety, and depression.

The good news is that it is treatable — even, to some extent, the severe scarring.

### Cause

The main causes of acne are:

#### 1. Increased oil or sebum production.

The size and number of oil-producing glands can increase due to hormonal activity. The glands are in each hair shaft, but not all oil producing glands are affected equally which explains why acne affects some parts of the body more than others.

#### 2. Dead skin cells blocking the hair shaft.

Skin cells die and are shed regularly but sometimes those dead skin cells can clump together in the hair shaft. They combine with the skin's natural oils and bacteria to form a lump that blocks the hair shaft causing a pimple.

#### 3. Bacteria and inflammation.

Sometimes a specific form of bacteria may get into the hair shaft. The body will recognise this and send special cells to attack it. This is known as an inflammatory response. This may cause the hair follicle to rupture, resulting in a cyst or lesion that may scar.

### Symptoms

Acne usually occurs in the parts of the body that have the most oil producing glands (sebaceous glands) — the face, chest and back. It is classified as mild, moderate or severe.

In its mild form it is usually small, raised red bumps which can sometimes have white or black heads (comedones).

Moderate acne has more inflamed lesions that are pink or red. These are known as papules, pustules, nodules or deeper lesions.

Severe acne has more deeper lesions that are inflamed nodules and cysts, sometimes called boils. These can cause scarring.

### Diagnosis

If your acne is moderate to severe and causing you to worry, you should see a doctor. The doctor will examine your skin and ask you a series of questions including:

- ▶ How long have you had pimples for?
- ▶ Are there any triggers? (eg, stress, exams etc)
- ▶ Is there a family history?
- ▶ What treatments have you had? How long did you follow each treatment?
- ▶ What was the most effective treatment? Why did you stop it?
- ▶ How do you feel about your skin? Does it stop you from doing anything?

The doctor may also order some blood tests to establish hormone levels as a baseline before starting hormone therapy, or to assess hormone levels in post-adolescent women. If you are female, it may also be used to rule out polycystic ovary syndrome — a condition that can affect skin, increase hair growth and affect your periods and fertility.

### Treatment

Treating acne takes time — you may have to wait a couple of months to see results.

The treatment for mild acne may involve over-the-counter skin cleansing or face wash products, which often contain a benzoyl peroxide or mild salicylic acid. These work by drying the skin out, but the downside is that the skin may become dry and flaky if used too frequently.

They may also irritate sensitive skin.

### Vitamin A cream

If these do not work a retinoid cream (vitamin A) may be prescribed to be applied at night. Initially the skin may look a little worse but after 6-8 weeks the benefits should be seen.

For moderate acne, in addition to the above treatments, either an antibiotic cream or tablet may be prescribed. The cream and tablet should not be used at the same time.

### Acne and hormones

If the underlying cause is believed to be related to hormones the contraceptive (birth control) pill may be prescribed for women. Certain pills are better than others at controlling acne. There are other "hormonal" medications such as spironolactone that can also be effective.

### Severe acne

For severe acne, oral antibiotics may be used, or drugs that inhibit oil production such as Roaccutane (isotretinoin) may be prescribed.

It may take 3-6 months to see results.

If oil inhibiting drugs are prescribed, they should not be used at the same time as topical retinoid creams or oral antibiotics as there can be serious side effects including brain swelling.

Oral isotretinoin is extremely effective at treating severe acne, however, it can have severe side effects including mood swings, depression and suicide and bowel problems. Most side effects, however, are mild (such as dry skin and lips) and can be managed with other measures.

It can only be prescribed by a specialist

and close monitoring is required. It should not be taken by pregnant women or women planning to get pregnant as it can cause birth defects. Women of childbearing age who take oral isotretinoin and who are sexually active do not wish to get pregnant should also use an effective form of contraception.

### Scarring

Studies have shown that scarring is less likely if acne is treated early and effectively, so early review by a GP is important.

There have been many recent advances in the treatment of acne scars, and a combination of therapies is usually the best option.

These include:

- ▶ **Chemical peels or dermabrasion** — therapies that remove the top few layers of the skin.
- ▶ **Laser resurfacing** or other types of **light therapy**, where the skin is exposed to a particular light frequency may also be recommended.
- ▶ **Fillers**, substances that are injected to expand the skin's surface may also be used for pitted scars. These may not remove scarring completely but may improve the skin's appearance.

Obviously, it is crucial that acne treatment is optimised before any scar treatments are undertaken to ensure that no new lesions can form. Always follow your doctor's advice and complete any treatments prescribed for you.

Your doctor may refer you to a dermatologist (skin specialist) or an endocrinologist (hormone specialist) if they think it is necessary.

### Myths and misconceptions:

- ▶ Acne is caused by eating greasy foods or chocolate — no, a healthy diet is a good idea but there is no evidence that eating greasy food gives you pimples.
- ▶ Acne will spread if you touch it — no. Sometimes people say touching or 'picking' pimples will make them spread, but this is not the case. It may, however, aggravate cysts or nodules and can cause infection so it is not recommended.
- ▶ Acne is caused by poor hygiene or dirty skin — no, in fact, excessive cleaning, scrubbing or exfoliating may irritate the skin and make it worse. Gentle cleansing twice daily is recommended.

### Lifestyle and diet

Avoiding oil-based or greasy skin products could help in reducing acne. Regular, gentle cleaning to remove excess oil can also help. Try and stick to products that claim to be "oil-free" or "non-comedogenic". Avoid products containing fragrance or alcohol.

Stick to twice-daily gentle cleansing and once-daily application of a non-comedogenic sunscreen. People with acne rarely require regular moisturiser unless there are dry areas.

While there is no evidence to suggest that

## Acne

eating greasy food affects your acne, a healthy, balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables is recommended.

### Acne and women:

Hormonal or post-adolescent acne can occur in women up to about 40 years of age. It is classified as mild, moderate or severe. Often it appears during the week before the period starts, or just after the period, when ovulation occurs because of fluctuating hormone levels.

Often they are known as blind pimples (as they do not have a white or black head) and they can be larger than usual and may last for many weeks but they do go away. They often appear along the jaw line, cheeks and neck.

In other cases it may be associated with **polycystic ovarian syndrome**, especially if it is associated with excessive hair growth (hirsutism) and irregular periods or other signs of the condition.

Women may also experience acne when they are pregnant, going on or coming off birth control pills, (some birth control pills can make acne worse, others can make it better) or later in life during menopause. Again changing hormone levels are the culprit.

### Acne and babies

In babies it is known as **infantile acne** and usually occurs from six months to three years of age. Generally it appears as pimples or inflammatory lesions on the cheeks, forehead and chin. The lesions usually settle after a few months, although scarring can occur with inflammatory and deeper lesions.

After birth babies may have little white spots known as **milk spots**, but these are not acne and resolve naturally within a couple of weeks.

### Support & online resources

Some useful online resources include:

- **All about acne**

[www.acne.org.au](http://www.acne.org.au)

- **The Australasian College of Dermatology**

[www.dermcoll.asn.au/public/a-z\\_of\\_skin-acne.asp](http://www.dermcoll.asn.au/public/a-z_of_skin-acne.asp)

- **American Academy of Dermatology. Guidelines of Care for Acne Vulgaris Management**

[www.aad.org/research/\\_doc/ClinicalResearch\\_Acne%20Vulgaris.pdf](http://www.aad.org/research/_doc/ClinicalResearch_Acne%20Vulgaris.pdf)

[It'sMyHealth.com.au](http://It'sMyHealth.com.au)