

Acne

What Causes Acne?

Almost all teenagers get acne at one time or another. Pimples are caused when oil ducts in the skin get plugged up and then burst, causing redness and swelling. Although there are many myths about acne, the following are the three main factors that cause it.

1. Hormones

When you begin puberty, certain hormones, called androgens, increase in both males and females. These hormones trigger oil ducts on the face, back and upper chest to begin producing oil. This can cause acne in some people.

2. Heredity

If other members of your family had acne as teenagers, there may be a chance that you've inherited a tendency toward getting acne as well.

3. Plugged oil ducts

If you are prone to acne, the cells that line the oil ducts in your skin tend to get larger and produce more oil, and the ducts get plugged. This traps the oil and leads to the formation of blackheads or whiteheads. The plugged ducts allow germs in the skin to multiply and produce chemicals that cause redness and swelling. This is why simple blackheads and whiteheads may turn red and bumpy and turn into the pimples of acne.

There is not much you can do about heredity, so your best control efforts are those that keep the oil ducts unplugged.

What *doesn't* cause acne?

- Acne is *not* caused by foods you eat. Despite what you may have heard, there is no proof that soft drinks, chocolate and greasy foods cause acne.
- It's *not* caused by dirt. The black plug in a blackhead is caused by a chemical reaction. It's not dirt. No matter how carefully you wash your face, you can still have acne.
- It's *not* something you can "catch" or "give" to another person.

If you have acne, there are some things that can make it worse. To keep acne under control, try to avoid the following:

- Pinching (or "popping") pimples, which forces oil from the oil ducts into the surrounding normal skin, causing redness and swelling. Irritating existing pimples can also increase the risk of scarring.
- Harsh scrubbing, which irritates the skin.
- Things that rub on the skin, such as headbands, hats, hair and chin straps, which also cause irritation.
- Certain cosmetics (makeup), such as creams and oily hair products, which can block oil ducts and aggravate acne.
- Certain medications.
- Emotional stress and nervous tension.

Treating Acne

It's important to know that there is no true cure for acne. If untreated, it can last for many years, although acne usually clears up as you get older. The following treatments, however, generally can keep acne under control.

1. Use topical benzoyl peroxide lotion or gel

Benzoyl peroxide helps kill skin bacteria, unplug the oil ducts and heal acne pimples. It is the most effective acne treatment you can get without a doctor's prescription. Many brands are available in different levels of strength (2.5 percent, 5 percent or 10 percent). Read the labels or ask your pediatrician or pharmacist about it.

- Start slowly with a 2.5 percent or 5 percent lotion or gel once a day. After a week, increase use to twice a day (morning and night) if your skin isn't too red or isn't peeling.
- Apply a thin film to the entire area where pimples may occur. Don't just dab it on current blemishes. Avoid the delicate skin around the eyes, mouth and corner of the nose.
- If your acne isn't better after four to six weeks, you may increase to a 10 percent strength lotion or gel. Start with one application each day and increase to two daily applications if your skin tolerates it.

With any preparation involving benzoyl peroxide, beware bleaching of towels, sheets, and pillowcases. Most patients apply at night, and using white towels and bedding to avoid permanent staining.

2. If you don't see results, consult your pediatrician

Your doctor can prescribe stronger treatments, if needed, and will teach you how to use them properly. Most acne medications take at least 2 weeks to have any effect, so do not wait until three days before prom to seek medical advice! Three kinds of medications may be recommended, either separately or in combination:

- **TRETINOIN (RETIN-A) CREAM OR GEL** helps unplug oil ducts but must be used exactly as directed. Be aware that exposure to the sun (or tanning parlors) can cause increased redness in some people who are using the medication. Acne may worsen over 2 weeks before improvement starts.
- **TOPICAL ANTIBIOTIC SOLUTIONS** may be used in addition to other medications for a type of acne called pustular acne.
- **ORAL ANTIBIOTIC PILLS** may be used in addition to creams, lotions or gels if your acne doesn't respond to topical treatments alone.

3. What about Accutane?

Isotretinoin (Accutane) is a very strong chemical taken in pill form. It is used only for severe cystic acne that hasn't responded to any other treatment. Accutane must **NEVER** be taken just before or during pregnancy. There is a danger of severe or even fatal deformities to unborn babies whose mothers have taken Accutane while pregnant or who become pregnant soon after taking Accutane. You should never have unprotected sexual intercourse while taking Accutane. Your pediatrician may require a negative pregnancy test and a signed consent form before prescribing Accutane to females.

If you are experiencing acne problems, remember that your pediatrician can help you. And as you begin treatment, keep these helpful tips in mind:

- **Be patient.** It takes three to six weeks to see any improvement. Give each treatment enough time to work.

- **Be faithful.** Follow your program every day. Don't stop and start each time your skin changes. Remember, sometimes your skin may appear to worsen early in the program before you begin to see improvement.
- **Follow directions.** Not using the treatment as directed is the most common reason the treatment fails.
- **Don't use medication prescribed for someone else.** This holds true for all medications, especially Accutane. Doctors prescribe medication specifically for particular patients. What's good for a friend may be harmful for you. Never take Accutane that's prescribed for another person.
- **Don't overdo it.** Too much scrubbing makes skin worse. Too much benzoyl peroxide or Retin-A cream makes your face red and scaly. Too much oral antibiotic may cause side effects.

Modified 2010 from the AAP by Dr. Amanda Dropic