

ACNE

Acne is the term for the pimples and complexion problems that develop in many teenagers and young adults. Pimples occur mainly on the face but can involve the neck, chest, back and upper arms. Acne is only a skin problem and does not affect your general health.

There is no one single cause of acne. There are many factors involved. The first is heredity that is the tendency of other family members to have acne. The second is hormonal stimulation. That is why acne usually occurs at puberty when the hormones stimulate the oil glands. In addition many women notice a fluctuation of their acne with their menstrual cycle and this is also hormonally related. Thirdly the oil glands on the skin have a tendency to become plugged from the inside. The reason that this tendency occurs in some patients is not clear. Fourth, the normal bacteria on the skin surface can break down the oil component of the glands. This leads to more redness and swelling.

At puberty the oil glands in the skin start producing a material called sebum. Sebum is discharged onto the skin's surface. The oil glands may become plugged with sebum and form blackheads and whiteheads. These are not caused by dirt since the plug forms from the inside. Sometimes the wall of the plugged oil gland breaks and spills the sebum within the skin. The sebum irritates the skin tissues and causes redness, swelling and pus, in other words, a pimple ("zit").

In mild acne only a few clogged pores and glands break open, while in severe acne many do. How easily oil glands do this seems to be built into your system. This is supported by the tendency of acne to run in families. It is impossible to completely prevent acne since there is no way of changing your oil glands. Many medications can help with prevention, however.

Acne usually begins in the teenage years but in some cases can develop later. How long you will have acne is impossible to predict. It is not unusual for acne to persist into or start in the 20's or 30's especially in women. In addition many women notice a fluctuation of their acne with their menstrual cycle.

Dirt does not cause acne despite what you may have been told. You cannot scrub acne away. Wash your face with ordinary soap and water as much as you need to keep it clean. Too much washing and scrubbing can cause skin irritation. Try not to pick or squeeze your pimples as it can leave scars. You may safely cover your acne with makeup or foundation.

In general foods do not cause acne. Many people try all sorts of diets and are frustrated because they do not help. In rare instances certain foods can make an individual's acne worse. If you feel that a specific food is a problem for you it would be best avoided.

Acne is not caused by nerves or worry, but may become worse under stress such as examinations or pressure at work. These are usually mild temporary flare ups. Some people react to stress by picking, squeezing, rubbing their pimples and this can make their acne worse.

TREATMENT

Fortunately there is very effective treatment for acne today. Your treatment will be individualized based on your exact situation. In many cases however it can take months or years for the treatment to be completely effective.

As I noted above acne has two parts. There are the larger red pimples (“zits”) and the clogged pores (blackheads and whiteheads). Therefore there are often two parts of treatment.

Treatment for the clogged pores basically involves various types of topical medication. These include Differin, Retin-A, Tazorac, benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid.

There are also many effective treatments for the pimple component of acne. This may involve topical medication such as benzoyl peroxide or topical antibiotics. In addition oral antibiotics are often used. Doxycycline and Minocycline are among the oral antibiotics used in treating acne. There are many other oral antibiotic agents available as well. These medications work by stopping the growth of a bacteria which causes excess irritation of the sebum or oil which breaks under the surface of the skin. Antibiotics usually work slowly so it may take up to a month or two before you notice any change. If you have only taken the pills for a week or two and do not notice any improvement do not be discouraged since it can take longer.

In many cases two different topical medications are used to treat acne. In most cases this is best done by alternating the medicines at night or by using one in the morning and one at night. In most cases these medications dry quickly and do not leave a film. It is fine to use makeup or cosmetic products over your acne treatment in the morning. The topical medications are best applied to all the areas since they do have a preventative effect as well.

Although acne is temporary occasionally it can leave permanent scarring. One of the major goals of acne treatment is to prevent scarring from developing. The larger a pimple is and the longer it lasts the greater a chance for a scar to develop. Scars can take the form of pick marks or shallow dents in the skin. Often times I recommend a treatment in the office which involves an injection of material directly into the inflamed pimple to decrease the swelling immediately. This reduces the chance of a scar developing in the area. If your complexion problem is beginning to produce scars I will try to point this out to you because it is important to treat the condition aggressively to prevent further scars from developing.