



# Acne

This handout will help you understand why people get acne and what can be done to treat it.

## What causes acne?

There are a number of myths about what causes acne. Despite what some people think, acne is **not** caused by certain foods. There are actually hormones in our body that cause the sebaceous glands to produce an oily substance called sebum. When the hair follicle gets plugged with sebum, dead skin cells and germs (bacteria), this leads to acne.

## What are the different types of acne?

- A **blackhead** (or open comedone) is formed when the pressure of the sebum and dead cells forces the plug to the surface of the skin. Air touches the plug and turns it black. Blackheads are not caused by dirt and cannot be washed or scrubbed away.
- A **whitehead** (or closed comedone) occurs when the plug remains below the skin surface.
- A **pimple** or pus bump (pustule) is formed when there is a lot of pressure from the sebum and dead skin. The trapped material may seep through the walls of the hair follicle and cause redness and discomfort.
- A **cyst** is a deep and painful swelling under the skin.

## Does acne cause scars?

Red bumps, pustules and cysts may leave permanent scars. Picking at acne may lead to scarring as well. There are certain treatments that may help reduce the scarring.

## Who gets acne?

Acne is very common. About 9 out of 10 people will have acne at some point in their lives. Acne usually begins soon after the start of puberty, when the oil glands in the body start making more sebum, but can start earlier. Family history plays a role in who gets acne. If your parents had acne, it's possible that you will, too.

## What makes acne worse?

- Stress
- Hormonal changes, especially during menstruation (periods)
- Oil-based makeup, suntan lotion and hair products
- Squeezing or picking at blemishes
- Hard scrubbing of the skin

### How is acne treated?

There are a number of different ways to treat acne, depending on the type of acne and how bad it is. Some common acne treatments are listed below. All acne treatments take time to work. It often takes 6 to 8 weeks or more before you will see an improvement. Also, it may take many months for blemishes or dark spots to fade. Check with your child's healthcare provider before giving your child any type of medicine.

#### □ Topical retinoids (such as tretinoin, Retin-A or Differin)

Topical retinoids are applied to the skin and help prevent and treat acne, especially blackheads and whiteheads. Apply a "pea-sized" amount of medicine every other night for the first two weeks. After two weeks, if there is no redness or irritation, apply the medicine every night. If you have too much redness or dryness when you use the medicine every other night, apply the medicine every third night. These medicines make your skin more sensitive to the sun.

#### □ Benzoyl peroxide

Benzoyl peroxide helps prevent the growth of bacteria and reduces inflammation (swelling and redness). It is found in many over-the-counter and prescription acne products. Be aware that benzoyl peroxide can bleach clothing and towels.

#### □ Topical antibiotics

Topical antibiotics are applied to the skin. They decrease skin bacteria and reduce inflammation. They may be used alone or combined with other treatments.

#### □ Oral antibiotics

An oral antibiotic is a medicine taken by mouth that reduces bacteria. It is used for acne with many red bumps, pustules and cysts. The most commonly prescribed antibiotic is doxycycline. This should be taken with plenty of liquid. Do not take it with milk or other liquids containing calcium. Doxycycline can cause an upset stomach. It can also make you very sensitive to the sun, so you must **wear sunscreen daily**.

#### □ Oral contraceptives (birth control pills)

Oral contraceptives have been shown to improve acne. Tell your doctor if there is a family history of blood clots. **Do not** smoke while taking oral contraceptives, because this increases your chance of getting blood clots.

#### □ Isotretinoin (Accutane)

Isotretinoin is a medicine taken by mouth that is used for the treatment of severe acne. It has many potential side effects to consider before taking.

### To Learn More

- Dermatology  
206-987-2158
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

### What else can I do about acne?

- **Do not** pop, squeeze or pick at acne. This can make acne worse by increasing inflammation and lead to scarring.
- Wash face gently twice a day with warm water and a mild cleanser such as Neutrogena Fresh Foaming Cleanser, Cetaphil Daily Facial Cleanser, or Purpose Gentle Cleansing Wash. If you have oily skin, you can try a wash with salicylic acid such as Neutrogena Oil-Free Acne Wash. Your doctor may also recommend a cleanser with benzoyl peroxide such as AcneFree Oil-free Acne Cleanser (2.5% Benzoyl Peroxide) or Neutrogena Clear Pore Cleanser/Mask (3.5% Benzoyl Peroxide) to use once or twice a day.
- Avoid harsh soaps and scrubs. Do not wash your face too often or scrub your face. This can irritate your skin and make acne worse.
- Use oil-free, water-based skin moisturizers and makeup if needed. Look for products that are labelled "non-comedogenic" (do not cause comedones).
- Oily hair, sweaty sports clothing and equipment, and airborne grease can make your acne worse. Avoid hair care products that contain oil, such as pomades and gels, and keep your hair off your face. Wear cotton clothing under sporting equipment.
- Avoid too much sun exposure and **do not** use tanning booths or sun lamps. Tanning does not treat acne, it simply masks it temporarily. Sun exposure and tanning cause aging and wrinkling of the skin, and can lead to skin cancer. Also, many acne treatments make you more sensitive to ultraviolet light from the sun, tanning booths and sun lamps. Protect your skin by wearing sun-protective clothing, hats, sunscreen, and avoid sunburns.
- Use your acne treatments regularly, following your provider's instructions.

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Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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