

ACNE

Acne is a skin condition that occurs when your hair follicles become plugged with oil and dead skin cells. It often causes whiteheads, blackheads or pimples, and usually appears on the face, forehead, chest, upper back and shoulders. Acne is most common among teenagers, though it affects people of all ages.

Effective treatments are available, but acne can be persistent. The pimples and bumps heal slowly, and when one begins to go away, others seem to crop up.

Depending on its severity, acne can cause emotional distress and scar the skin. The earlier you start treatment, the lower your risk of such problems.



Symptoms

- Whiteheads (closed plugged pores)
- Blackheads (open plugged pores)
- Small red, tender bumps (papules)
- Pimples (pustules), which are papules with pus at their tips
- Large, solid, painful lumps beneath the surface of the skin (nodules)
- Painful, pus-filled lumps beneath the surface of the skin (cystic lesions)



When to see a doctor

If self-care remedies do not clear your acne, see your primary care doctor. He or she can prescribe stronger medications. If acne persists or is severe, you may want to seek medical treatment from a doctor who specializes in the skin (dermatologist).

For many women, acne can persist for decades, with flares common a week before menstruation. This type of acne tends to clear up without treatment in women who use contraceptives.

In older adults, a sudden onset of severe acne may signal an underlying disease requiring medical attention.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warns that some popular non-prescription acne lotions, cleansers and other skin products can cause a serious reaction. This type of reaction is quite rare, so do not confuse it with the redness, irritation or itchiness where you've applied medications or products.

Seek emergency medical help if after using a skin product you experience:

- Faintness
- Difficulty breathing
- Swelling of the eyes, face, lips or tongue
- Tightness of the throat

Causes

Four main factors cause acne:

- Excess oil production
- Hair follicles clogged by oil and dead skin cells
- Bacteria
- Excess activity of a type of hormone (androgens)

Acne typically appears on your face, forehead, chest, upper back and shoulders because these areas of skin have the most oil (sebaceous) glands. Hair follicles are connected to oil glands.



The follicle wall may bulge and produce a whitehead. Or the plug may be open to the surface and darken, causing a blackhead. A blackhead may look like dirt stuck in pores. But the pore is congested with bacteria and oil, which turns brown when it's exposed to the air.

Pimples are raised red spots with a white center that develop when blocked hair follicles become inflamed or infected with bacteria. Blockages and inflammation that develop deep inside hair follicles produce cyst like lumps beneath the surface of your skin. Other pores in your skin, which are the openings of the sweat glands, are not usually involved in acne.

Factors that may worsen acne

These factors can trigger or aggravate acne:

- **Hormones.** Androgens are hormones that increase in boys and girls during puberty and cause the sebaceous glands to enlarge and make more sebum. Hormonal changes related to pregnancy and the use of oral contraceptives also can affect sebum production. And low amounts of androgens circulate in the blood of women and can worsen acne.
- **Certain medications.** Examples include drugs containing corticosteroids, testosterone or lithium.
- **Diet.** Studies indicate that certain dietary factors, including skim milk and carbohydrate-rich foods — such as bread, bagels and chips — may worsen acne. Chocolate has long been suspected of making acne worse. A small study of 14 men with acne showed that eating chocolate was related to a worsening of symptoms. Further study is needed to examine why this happens and whether people with acne would benefit from following specific dietary restrictions.
- **Stress.** Stress can make acne worse.