

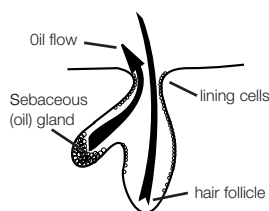
Acne

(Acne vulgaris)

Acne is caused by changes in sebaceous (oil) glands and hair follicles in the skin that occur during puberty. Most teenagers get some blackheads and pimples and some develop more severe, widespread acne. Acne can be effectively controlled with skin cleansers and medicines.

The common type of acne is called acne vulgaris. It develops mainly on the face, neck, chest, shoulders and upper back. Lesions can be non-inflamed (whiteheads and blackheads) or inflamed (red or pus-filled pimples, nodules and cysts). Acne lesions sometimes cause scarring.

How does acne occur?

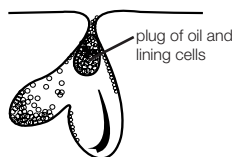


The skin cells that line a hair follicle are continuously shed and replaced. Dead skin cells are carried to the surface of the skin by sebum (oil).

During puberty, changing levels of sex hormones increase sebum production and the shedding of skin cells in the hair follicle. The increased amount of sebum and cells can cause a comedo (plug) that blocks the follicle. The blocked follicle then swells as more sebum is produced. In addition, bacteria can multiply in these blocked hair follicles and cause inflammation.

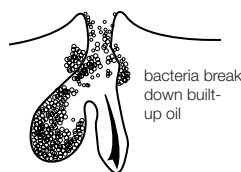
Whiteheads

A whitehead is a 'closed' comedo. The plug is under the skin and it appears as a creamy white or skin coloured bump.



Blackheads

A whitehead becomes a blackhead, or 'open' comedo, when enough sebum builds up behind the plug to push it to the



skin surface. It darkens when exposed to light due to the presence of skin pigment called melanin (not because of dirt).

Pimples

Acne pimples or 'zits' are inflamed acne lesions and may be painful. They include small papules (red bumps) and pustules (bumps with pus) and larger, deeper nodules and cysts. These inflamed lesions develop as bacteria and oil irritate the blocked hair follicle and when blocked hair follicles burst and release bacteria, oil and irritants into surrounding skin. Squeezing and rubbing inflamed lesions can cause more inflammation and damage and increase the risk of scarring.

What makes acne worse?

A person with a family history of severe acne has a higher risk of having severe acne. Things that may trigger or worsen acne include:

- Some skin-care and hair-care products increase the amount of oil on the skin (e.g., oil-based make-up, hair oils, suntan oils).
- Working with oils and greases can increase the amount of oil on the skin (e.g., frying foods).
- Scrubbing, scratching, squeezing or picking the skin.
- Pressure from tight-fitting clothes, headbands and chinstraps.
- Perspiration.
- High humidity (e.g., a sauna, tropical climates).
- Hormonal changes (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy).
- Stress, anxiety or illness.
- Some medicines – ask a pharmacist or doctor.

Important

- Some acne preparations are only applied to the pimples and some to the whole area – read and follow instructions carefully.
- Improvement may not be seen for four to eight weeks with some treatments.
- Consult a pharmacist or doctor if any acne treatment stings or irritates your skin.
- Consult a doctor if non-prescription acne treatments have been used for some time with no improvement.
- Some acne preparations can make the skin more sensitive to the sun. Use an oil-free, SPF30+ sunscreen every day.
- Some acne medicines (e.g., retinoids) should NOT be used shortly before or during pregnancy.

Treating acne

Acne treatments aim to unblock hair follicles, and reduce sebum production, bacteria on the skin and skin inflammation. Many products are available to treat acne – ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice. Acne treatments include:

Non-prescription treatments

- Mild, non-oily skin cleansers and antiseptic washes – help control skin oiliness and skin bacteria
- Salicylic acid and sulphur creams, gels and lotions – help unblock hair follicles
- Benzoyl peroxide and azelaic acid creams, gels and lotions – help unblock hair follicles and reduce skin bacteria.

Prescription medicines and treatments

- **Antibiotics** – topical (e.g., clindamycin, erythromycin) and oral (e.g., doxycycline, erythromycin, minocycline) – have anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory effects.
- **Retinoids** – topical (e.g., *Adapalene*, *Isotretinoin*, *Tazarotene*, *Tretinoin*) and oral (e.g., *Acitretin*, *Isotretinoin*) – reduce comedo formation, inflammation and scarring. Oral retinoids are reserved for severe acne.
- **Hormones** (e.g., some oral contraceptive pills) – can reduce sebum production and may help some women.
- **Phototherapy** (e.g., laser and light treatments).
- **Zinc supplements** – may help some people.

Self care

- Gently cleanse the affected areas twice a day and after exercise. A specific acne cleanser can be used morning and night and a gentle soap substitute at other times. It is important to use a cleanser that is not oily and does not block skin pores or irritate skin. Use lukewarm water. Pat dry with a soft towel.
- Do not pop, squeeze, rub or pick at acne.
- Oil-based creams and cosmetics can make acne worse. Use oil-free, water-based makeup, moisturisers and sunscreen. Avoid strongly fragranced products.
- Thoroughly remove make-up at the end of the day.
- Keep hair clean and away from face and neck.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.
- Drink at least two litres (eight glasses) of water daily (unless a doctor advises not to).

Related fact cards

- *Sense in the Sun*

For more information

Australasian College of Dermatologists – website www.dermcoll.asn.au

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc – website www.dermnetnz.org

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

