

# Acne

Acne is a skin condition caused by changes in oil glands and hair follicles in the skin. It is usually related to hormone changes that occur during puberty. Most teenagers have some blackheads and pimples. Some develop more severe acne. Acne can be well managed with skin cleansers and medicines.

The common type of acne is called acne vulgaris. It mainly affects the face, neck, chest, shoulders and upper back. It is most common on the face. Skin lesions can be non-inflamed (whiteheads and blackheads) or inflamed (red or pus-filled pimples, nodules and cysts). Acne may be mild, moderate or severe. Acne lesions sometimes cause scars.

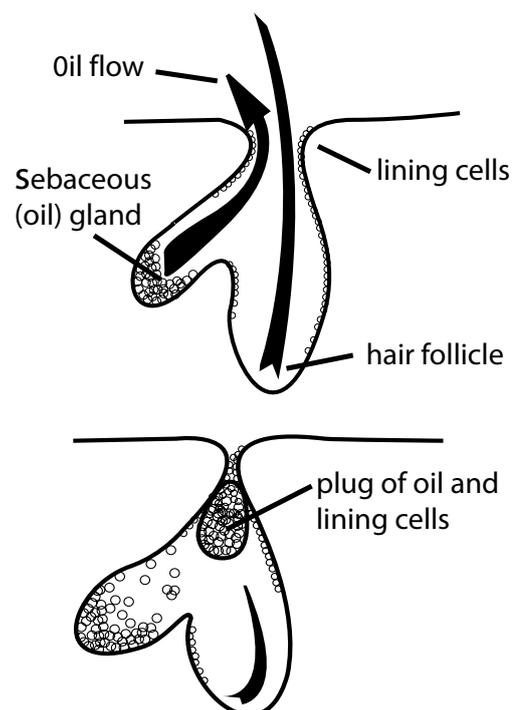
## How does acne occur?

The skin cells that line a hair follicle are constantly 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 plug the follicle, which then swells as more sebum is produced. The plugged follicle is

called a comedo. Bacteria can then grow in the blocked hair follicle 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 as it contains some of the 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. Inflamed lesions develop when bacteria and oil irritate the blocked hair follicle, and when blocked hair follicles burst and release irritating substances into surrounding skin. Squeezing and rubbing inflamed lesions can cause more inflammation and damage, and increase the risk of scars.

## What makes acne worse?

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

- some skin care and hair care products increase the amount of oil on the skin.
- working with oils and greases can increase the amount of oil on the skin.
- scrubbing, scratching, squeezing or picking the skin.
- pressure from tight-fitting clothes, headbands and chinstraps.
- perspiration.

- high humidity (e.g. a sauna, tropical climates).
- hormone changes (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy).
- stress, anxiety or illness.
- smoking.
- some medicines – ask a pharmacist or doctor.

## Treating acne

Acne treatments aim to unblock hair follicles, reduce sebum production, reduce bacteria on the skin and reduce skin inflammation. Some treatments may take six weeks or more to improve acne. Many products are available to treat acne. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

### Some non-prescription treatments

**Skin cleansers and antiseptic washes** – mild, non-soap, non-oily products help control skin oiliness and skin bacteria.

**Salicylic acid** and **sulphur** creams, gels and lotions – can unblock hair follicles.

**Benzoyl peroxide** creams, gels and lotions – reduce comedo formation and skin bacteria.

**Azelaic acid** creams, gels and lotions – reduce comedo formation and skin bacteria.

### Prescription medicines

**Antibiotics** – creams and gels (e.g. clindamycin, erythromycin), and tablets and capsules (e.g. doxycycline, erythromycin, minocycline) – reduce skin bacteria and inflammation.

**Retinoids** – creams and gels (e.g. adapalene, isotretinoin, tazarotene,

tretinoin) reduce comedo formation and inflammation. Isotretinoin capsules (e.g. *Oratane, Roaccutane*) reduce sebum production, comedo formation, inflammation and cyst formation. Isotretinoin capsules are reserved for severe acne, due to the risk of serious side effects.

**Hormones** (e.g. some oral contraceptive pills) – can reduce sebum production and may help some women.

## Self care

- Gently cleanse the acne areas twice a day and after exercise. An acne cleanser or a gentle, soap-free cleanser may be used. It is important to use a cleanser that is not oily, and does not irritate skin. Follow cleanser instructions. 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 perfumed (scented) products and products containing alcohol.
- Carefully remove makeup at the end of the day.
- Keep hair clean and away from face and neck.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. 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 enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to relax your body and mind.
- Don't smoke.

## Important

- Read and follow instructions for acne products carefully.
- Talk to a pharmacist or doctor if any acne treatment stings or irritates your skin.
- Seek medical advice if non-prescription acne treatments have been used for more than six weeks with no improvement.
- Some acne treatments can make the skin more sensitive to the sun. Use oil-free and at least SPF30+ sunscreen every day.
- Some acne medicines (e.g. retinoids) must not be used shortly before or during pregnancy. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## For more information

### All about acne

Website: [www.acne.org.au](http://www.acne.org.au)

### Australasian College of Dermatologists

Website: [www.dermcoll.asn.au](http://www.dermcoll.asn.au)

### New Zealand Dermatological Society

Website: [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### NPS MedicineWise

#### Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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

## Related Fact Cards

» *Oral contraceptives*

» *Sense in the sun*

**Your Self Care Pharmacy:** Gosford Paediatrics  
Suite 9, 16-18 Hills Street GOSFORD NSW 2250  
<http://www.gosfordpaediatrics.com.au>  
02 4322 5437

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