

Almost all teenagers get acne at one time or another. Whether your case is mild or severe, the information here can help you keep your acne under control.

**What Causes Acne?** You haven't done anything to cause your acne. It's not your fault if you have it. Pimples are caused when oil ducts in the skin get plugged up and then burst, causing redness and swelling. Although there are many myths about acne, the following are the three main factors that cause it.

1. **Hormones:** When you begin puberty, certain hormones, called androgens, increase in both males and females. These hormones trigger oil ducts on the face, back, and upper chest to begin producing oil. This can cause acne in some people.
2. **Heredity:** When members of your family have had acne as teenagers, there is a chance that you'll inherit the tendency toward getting acne as well.
3. **Plugged oil ducts:** If you are prone to acne, the cells that line the oil ducts in your skin tend to get larger and produce more oil, and the ducts get plugged. This traps the oil and leads to the formation of blackheads or whiteheads. The plugged ducts allow germs in the skin to multiply and produce chemicals that may cause redness and swelling. This is why simple blackheads and whiteheads may turn red and bumpy and turn into the pimples of acne. There is not much you can do about heredity, so your best control efforts are those that keep the oil ducts unplugged.

#### **What makes acne worse?**

- Pinching (or "popping") pimples, which forces oil from the oil ducts into the surrounding normal skin, causing redness and swelling
- Harsh scrubbing, which irritates the skin
- Certain cosmetics (makeup), such as creams and oily hair products, which can block oil ducts and aggravate acne
- For young women, changes in hormone levels brought on by menstrual periods
- Emotional stress and nervous tension

#### **What doesn't cause acne?**

- Acne is not caused by foods you eat. Despite what you may have heard there is no proof that soft drinks, chocolate, and greasy foods cause acne
- It's not caused by dirt. The black plug in a blackhead is caused by a chemical reaction.

**Treating Acne:** It's important to know that there is no true cure for acne. If untreated, it can last for many years, though acne usually clears up as you get older. The following treatments, however, generally can keep acne under control.

1. **Use topical benzoyl peroxide lotion or gel.** Benzoyl peroxide helps kill skin bacteria, unplug the oil ducts, and heal acne pimples. It is the most effective acne treatment you can get without a doctor's prescription. Read the labels or ask your pediatrician or pharmacist about it.
  - Start slowly with a 2.5% or 5% lotion or gel once a day. After a week, increase use to twice a day (morning and night)
  - Apply a thin film to the entire area where pimples may occur. Don't just dab it on current blemishes. Avoid the delicate skin around the eyes, mouth, and corner of the nose.
2. **If you don't see results.** Your doctor can prescribe stronger treatments, if needed, and will teach you how to use them properly. Three kinds of medications may be recommended:
  - **Tretinoin (Retin-A) cream or gel** helps unplug oil ducts but must be used exactly as directed. Be aware that exposure to the sun (or tanning parlors) can cause increased redness in some people who are using the medication.
  - **Topical antibiotic solutions** may be used in addition to other medications for a type of acne called pustular acne.
  - **Oral antibiotic pills** may be used in addition to creams, lotions, or gels if your acne doesn't respond to topical treatments alone.
3. **What about the "miracle drug" Accutane?** Isotretinoin (Accutane) is a very strong chemical taken in pill form. It is used only for severe cystic acne that hasn't responded to any other treatment. Patients who take Accutane must be carefully supervised by a pediatric dermatologist.

### Important things to remember

- **Be patient.** It takes 3 to 6 weeks to see any improvement. Give each treatment enough time to work.
- **Be faithful.** Follow your program every day. Don't stop and start each time your skin changes. Remember, sometimes your skin may appear to worsen early in the program before you begin to see any improvements.
- **Follow directions.** Not using the treatment as directed is the most common reason the treatment fails.
- **Don't use medications prescribed for someone else.** What's good for a friend may be harmful for you.

**A word about acne and birth control pills:** In 1996 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a low-dose birth control pill to be used as an effective treatment for acne in women over 15 years of age. Research has shown that certain birth control pills lower the level of hormones that cause acne.

However, taking birth control pills along with other medications for the prevention of acne may reduce the effectiveness of both medications. If you are taking birth control pills, talk to your pediatrician about their effect on acne.

