



## **ACNE**

### **DEFINITION**

Acne is the medical term for blackheads, whiteheads, pimples, and cysts usually located on the face, upper back, and chest. It less frequently occurs on the thighs, buttocks, arms, and scalp. Acne is classified into non-inflammatory (blackheads and whiteheads only) and inflammatory (tender papules, pustules, and cysts) types and is caused by several factors. Most important may be the hereditary tendency that is passed in families. Hormones also play an important role in causing acne by increasing oil production and causing the cells that line the wall of the pores to stick together, thus blocking the pore. This blockage can lead to spontaneous rupture of the pore below the skin surface, resulting in red bumps. Normal skin bacteria which live in the oil glands also play a major role; these germs are not contagious and cannot be scrubbed away. Any oily creams or lotions applied to acne-prone areas tend to worsen acne by plugging the pores. Scrubbing or irritating the skin also increases the number of inflammatory lesions as the skin is very sensitive and needs to be treated gently.

### **TREATMENT**

The approach varies depending on the patient and type of acne. Medicines do not eliminate scars or make active acne lesions clear any faster, but regular use decreases the development of new lesions. Office treatments such as injections, freezing, and acne surgery can help you look better while the medicines begin to work and help prevent scarring. Treatment is not curative, but usually gives considerable improvement. The following are medications that might be prescribed for your use at home:

**Retinoids** (Retin-A, Differin, Tazorac) are peeling/drying agents applied daily to unplug the blocked oil glands. All retinoids cause redness, irritation, and dryness during initiation of therapy. You may add a facial moisturizer to help with these side effects. Benzoyl peroxide and topical acids also help to unplug pores.

**Topical Antibiotics** are less effective than antibiotic pills, but may help to treat inflammatory acne in less severe cases. They are also used in combination with pills to help clear patients faster. Resistant germs can develop, so topical antibiotics are often used in combination with benzoyl peroxide (Acanya, Duac).

**Antibiotic pills** have been the mainstay of acne treatment for over 50 years. They help to suppress growth of bacteria and decrease inflammation around the pores. Antibiotic pills are safe and can be taken for years. They do not cause resistant germs that make you sick. The tetracycline class is most frequently prescribed:

- **Doxycycline** (Doryx, Monodox) should be taken with food and a large glass of water and can be taken with dairy products. At high doses, some patients may experience easy sunburning. Use sun protection and do not take before lying down as severe heartburn may occur if the pills dissolve before they reach the stomach.
- **Minocycline** (Minocin, Solodyn) can be taken with food and dairy products. It does not cause sunburn. It may cause dizziness as you get used to it and has been reported to cause skin discoloration after many months to years of treatment. The discoloration is a harmless cosmetic problem that usually resolves after the medicine is stopped.

In-office treatments are often performed to clear existing acne lesions and to reduce scarring. They may include any combination of the following:

- Injections into individual acne lesions (cysts) with a cortisone type medication help to reduce the redness and swelling while lessening the likelihood of scarring.
- Freezing individual cysts, papules, and pustules with liquid nitrogen helps to clear the redness and inflammation much faster. Freezing produces a very superficial frostbite which leads to an almost invisible peeling of the skin. Treatment is painless.
- Acne surgery (draining pustules and cysts) decreases scarring and helps individual papules, pustules, and cysts dry up faster. It is the only way to remove persistent blackheads and whiteheads. It must be done in the office with sterile instruments and should not be attempted at home.
- Chemical peels (glycolic acid, salicylic acid) are performed every 2-4 weeks and may reduce acne and minimize early, superficial acne scars. Peels are considered a cosmetic treatment and are never covered by insurance companies.

## GENERAL RULES ABOUT ACNE

- **Sunlight** probably does not help acne. Rarely, some acne medications may cause a sunburn. Chronic sun exposure can actually lead to more blackheads and whiteheads.
- There is little scientific data to prove that **diet** (any particular foods or drinks) makes acne worse. There is no need for a special diet, but a nutritious, well-balanced diet is always important.
- Oil-based **makeup** preparations (including moisturizers) can flare acne, especially blackheads and whiteheads. Use oil-free, non-comedogenic makeup and never use oil-based moisturizer or cold cream.
- **Vitamins** do nothing to help acne in normal doses.
- Please **do not pick on your face**. Picking makes acne worse and can lead to permanent scarring.
- All topical acne medications should be applied in a **very thin coat over all acne areas**. These are not for spot treatment. The goal is to prevent new lesions in addition to clearing those already present.
- Each medication is only to be used by the one person for whom it was prescribed. **Do not share** with friends or family members since the medication may not be appropriate or safe for them. Each patient is different and should be evaluated by a physician before treatment.
- Most acne, depending on the type and tolerance to medications, takes at least 6-12 weeks to show considerable improvement. **Be patient** and continue regular use of your medications. After improvement, the same or milder treatment is usually needed for months to years to maintain control. Remember, there is no quick or permanent cure.
- **Polycystic Ovarian Disease** is a condition caused by the overproduction of male hormones in women. Women with this condition may have acne, irregular periods, extra facial and body hair, and obesity. This can be detected by simple blood tests and can be treated by your gynecologist. Tell your doctor if you have irregular periods.
- **Accutane** is an oral medication reserved for severe or unresponsive acne. It is used for approximately 20 weeks and may put patients into remission. Patients on Accutane must get frequent blood tests and women on Accutane must use appropriate contraceptives. Please inquire about Accutane if you feel that you may be a candidate.
- **Stop all oral and topical acne medications if you become pregnant**. Few acne medications are safe during pregnancy. If you are trying to become pregnant, stop all acne medications until you discuss this with your physician.

