

Acne (spots)

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 8

This fact sheet helps you to know what is 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from acne (spots). It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

What is acne?

Acne often starts at puberty and leads to greasy skin and 'spots'. People may feel bad about themselves because of the way their skin looks, often at a time when they are already vulnerable.

How common is acne?

Acne affects many people including 8 out of 10 teenagers to some degree, and more frequently boys. Around one in three teenagers have acne bad enough to need treatment. In women and girls, acne is more common around the time of their monthly periods.

What causes it?

Acne is caused by inflamed skin glands on your face and upper trunk, often made worse by bacteria in the skin. In rare cases, acne may be caused by an underlying medical condition, such as polycystic ovary disease (PCO) or other hormonal disorders. It's a myth that stress or certain foods (such as chocolate) cause acne – and acne is certainly not due to a lack of cleanliness!

What can I expect to happen?

Duration

Acne is a long-term condition that may need immediate treatment for treating severely affected skin, and maintenance therapy to keep spots from recurring. In seven out of ten people, acne stops within five years – but some people experience skin problems lasting into their 20s and, rarely, longer. Relapse and recurrence is common after improvements are seen.

Severity

Acne can vary from being mild and localised to severe and widespread.

Impact on your life

Acne can make people feel bad about themselves, no matter how bad their spots are.

Tests

You won't need any tests unless your doctor suspects an underlying medical cause.

Treatment for acne

Over-the-counter creams, gels and lotions: Effective treatments are available to reduce and improve spots. They can also prevent or reduce scarring if started early.

Ask a member of your pharmacy team for advice.

Combination topical lotions (eg benzoyl peroxide +retinoid or antibiotic) are often recommended.

Treatments typically take 6-8 weeks to begin to work so continue use to allow time for improvement.



What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

Washing

Wash your face only once or twice a day with a non-alkaline (pH neutral or slightly acidic), synthetic detergent (Syndet) or simply use lukewarm water. Avoid strong or abrasive soaps and excessive scrubbing. Be aware that hot water and rough flannels can make symptoms worse rather than better.

Avoid squeezing

No matter how tempting, try not to squeeze or scratch acne spots, as this may cause scarring.

When to seek help

Seek advice from a member of your pharmacy team or your surgery if initial treatment with over-the-counter products doesn't work for you, if acne significantly impacts your quality of life, or if any of the following symptoms are present:

- **Severity:** Your acne is really bad and you feel physically unwell because of it.
- **Pain:** You develop painful spots that feel "deep" in your skin.
- **Distress:** You get distressed by your acne, or it affects your day-to-day life.
- **Scarring:** You notice the beginning of scarring despite treatment.
- **Possible underlying medical causes:** You suspect that you may have an underlying medical condition that causes your acne - for example, if you have additional symptoms such as infrequent or absent periods, excessive hair growth or loss.
- **Acne fulminans:** Seek help from a health professional if you experience fever and joint stiffness associated with acne.

Make up and skincare

When choosing make-up and sunscreens, choose "non-comedogenic" (should not cause blackheads or whiteheads), or 'non-acnegenic' (should not cause acne), and avoid oil-based products. Avoid oil-based and comedogenic make up and always remove make up at the end of the day. Make-up experts, including pharmacists, can help advise.

Diet

Although there is insufficient evidence to suggest that some diets are better than others in acne management, following a healthy, balanced diet, with 5 portions of fruit and vegetables, wholegrains, fresh and unprocessed foods, lean meat, fish or alternatives, and avoiding high sugar foods, and red or fatty meat, promotes wellbeing and weight management. Staying hydrated, drinking 6-8 glasses of water each day is also important.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help you assess your symptoms and provide advice on suitable treatments.

Or, visit these websites for more information:

[British Association of Dermatologists](#)

[NHS Website - Acne](#)

[The Eatwell Guide](#)

