



## Helpful Hints for Treating Acne

**A**cne comes from the hormones that not only make the obvious changes in our bodies that mark us as adults, but also change our skin gland production. Contrary to folk wisdom, acne does not come from dirt, chocolate, pizza or anything else we eat, or from masturbating for that matter. Here are some things that do make it worse: occlusive and greasy hair products, heat and humidity, excessive washing, friction or pressure, and stress.

Pimples, or comedones, come from the sebaceous glands in our skin that surround the little hairs on our face and upper trunk. These glands secrete a substance called sebum, which then escapes up the hair shaft onto the surface of the skin. When your hormones kick in, however, two major things happen. First, the glands get bigger and secrete more sebum, and the sebum itself gets thicker and stickier, so it can't escape as easily. Second, the skin cells that line the sides of the hair follicles also get stickier, so they don't fall off so easily, and instead they hang around the hair and clog the exit for the sebum. The net result is that these follicles get clogged with sebum. If the clog is below the skin surface, it is called a "whitehead." If it is near the surface, the oil turns dark and is called a "blackhead."

There are further complications. We normally have on our skin and around the little hairs a bacteria called *Propionibacterium acnes*, or P acnes. This bacterium acts on the sebum to make it infected and inflamed, and can then break through the side of the hair follicle and get into the surrounding skin. This becomes an infected pimple.

Luckily, we now have effective treatment for acne. If we keep in mind how pimples are formed, we can understand how these medicines work.

### General care of your skin

- Wash your skin twice a day, and after exercising or sweating.

- Shampoo your hair frequently, and keep it away from your face.
- Avoid picking, or popping pimples or blackheads.
- Avoid oil-based products wherever you break out, whether it's on your face, neck, chest or back.
- Oil-free products are fine. "Acne cover-ups" are fine for pimples.
- Sunlight will often help acne. Remember to wear oil-free sunscreen!

### Treatment of acne

**Retin-A** (or tretinoin), is one of our best medicines. Retin-A makes the skin cells less sticky and makes them shed more easily. Put Retin-A on at night about 20 minutes after washing. After a week or two you will notice some peeling of the skin, and maybe some irritation which is normal. If it makes you really sensitive, decrease the dosage to every other day. In a few more weeks, your skin will be almost free of pimples. Be sure to use sunscreen as sun exposure may cause rash.

**Antibiotics**—oral or topical—kill the P acnes so even though it won't affect the formation of whiteheads or blackheads, it will keep them from getting infected.

**Benzoyl Peroxide 5%** is an over-the-counter medicine for acne. This medicine also kills the P acnes and produces a drying effect. It may cause your face to peel and get a little red. Benzoyl Peroxide may be used at bedtime, but you can use it in the morning if Retin-A is used at night.

### Common mistakes in treating acne

- Avoid excessive scrubbing and don't use exfoliants.
- Avoid oily make-up, lotions or sunscreens. Use "noncomedogenic" or "nonacnegenic" products.
- Apply acne medications to the entire face, not just the areas where there are pimples. Typically, acne therapies require 6 to 8 weeks of continuous use to obtain positive results.

