



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia

**Self Care**  
™ Health Advice for Life

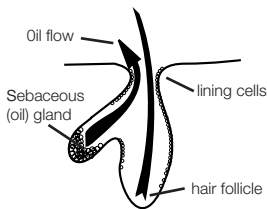
# Acne

## (Acne vulgaris)

**Acne is a skin disorder caused by changes in sebaceous (oil) glands and hair follicles that occur during puberty. Most teenagers get some blackheads and pimples and some develop more severe, widespread acne. Acne can be effectively controlled with skin cleansers and medicines.**

The common type of acne is called acne vulgaris. It develops mainly on the face, neck, chest, shoulders and upper back. 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 and lesions sometimes cause scarring.

### How does acne occur?



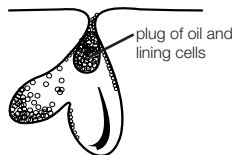
The skin cells that line a hair follicle are continuously shed and replaced. Dead skin cells are carried to the surface of the skin by sebum (oil).

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 multiply in the blocked hair follicle and cause inflammation.

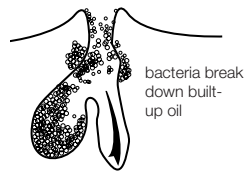
### Whiteheads

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 due to the presence of 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. These inflamed lesions develop when bacteria and oil irritate the blocked hair follicle and when blocked hair follicles burst and release bacteria, oil and irritants into surrounding skin. Squeezing and rubbing inflamed lesions can cause more inflammation and damage and increase the risk of scarring.

### What makes acne worse?

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

- Some skin care and hair care products increase the amount of oil on the skin (e.g., oil-based makeup, hair oils, suntan oils)
- Working with oils and greases can increase the amount of oil on the skin (e.g., frying foods)
- Scrubbing, scratching, squeezing or picking the skin
- Pressure from tight-fitting clothes, headbands and chinstraps
- Perspiration
- High humidity (e.g., a sauna, tropical climates)
- Hormonal changes (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy)
- Stress, anxiety or illness
- Some medicines – ask a pharmacist or doctor.

## Important

- Read and follow instructions for acne products carefully.
- Improvement may not be seen for four to eight weeks with some treatments.
- Consult a pharmacist or doctor if any acne treatment stings or irritates your skin.
- Consult a doctor if non-prescription acne

treatments have been used for some time with no improvement.

- Some acne preparations can make the skin more sensitive to the sun. Use an oil-free, SPF30+ sunscreen every day.
- Some acne medicines (e.g., retinoids) should NOT be used shortly before or during pregnancy. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice

## Treating acne

Acne treatments aim to unblock hair follicles, reduce sebum production, reduce bacteria on the skin and reduce skin inflammation. Many products are available to treat acne – ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice. Acne treatments include:

### Non-prescription treatments

- **Skin cleansers and antiseptic washes** – mild, non-oily products help control skin oiliness and skin bacteria
- **Salicylic acid and sulphur** creams, gels and lotions – help unblock hair follicles
- **Benzoyl peroxide and azelaic acid** creams, gels and lotions – reduce comedo formation and reduce skin bacteria
- **Zinc supplements** – may help some people.

### Prescription medicines and treatments

- **Antibiotics** – topical (e.g., clindamycin, erythromycin) and oral (e.g., doxycycline, erythromycin, minocycline) – have anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory effects.
- **Retinoids** – topical retinoids (e.g., adapalene, isotretinoin, tazarotene, tretinoin) reduce comedo formation, inflammation and scarring. Oral isotretinoin (e.g., *Oratane*, *Roaccutane*) reduces sebum production, but is reserved for severe acne, due to the risk of adverse effects.
- **Hormones** (e.g., some oral contraceptive pills) – can reduce sebum production and may help some women.
- **Phototherapy** (e.g., laser and light treatments) – may help some people.
- **Zinc supplements** – may help some people.

## Self care

- Gently cleanse the affected areas twice a day and after exercise. A specific acne cleanser can be used morning and night and a gentle soap substitute at other times. It is important to use a cleanser that is not oily and does not block skin pores or irritate skin. 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 fragranced products.
- Thoroughly 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 grain 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 otherwise).
- Don't smoke.

## Related fact cards

- *Oral Contraceptives*
- *Sense in the Sun (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

## For more information

**Australasian College of Dermatologists** – website [www.dermcoll.asn.au](http://www.dermcoll.asn.au)

**New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc** – website [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**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.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist