

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Acne

**Most people get spots as a teenager. Some people also get them as adults. If you don't like the way your spots look, or you're worried about scars, there are good treatments that can help.**

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

### What happens?

Acne is just another word for spots. If the pores in your skin get blocked, natural oil in your skin can build up behind them. This causes spots.

You might hear people say that acne is caused by not washing enough. This isn't true. And there's no good evidence that fatty foods or chocolate cause acne.

### What are the symptoms?

Acne usually means you have spots on your face. But you can also get acne on your neck, back, chest, or arms. You may get blackheads (small black marks) or whiteheads (white bumps). Spots can also become red and inflamed. Really bad spots can cause scars when they heal. But getting treatment can help prevent scarring.

### What treatments work?

#### Gels and creams you can buy yourself

You can buy lots of acne products from chemists. We can't say how well most of these work. There hasn't been much research on them. Some claim to be 'fast-acting', but the research we looked at says that all acne treatments take several weeks to work.

Researchers have looked at over-the-counter treatments that contain an ingredient called **benzoyl peroxide**. Some brands that contain benzoyl peroxide are Brevoxyl and PanOxyl. You can always check the label if you're not sure what ingredients are in a particular product.

You use benzoyl peroxide cream or gel once or twice a day, usually after you wash. Research shows that people have fewer spots after they've used it for between four and 12 weeks. But about 2 or 3 out of 10 people get mild side effects. You may get red or peeling skin, or a tingling feeling. Benzoyl peroxide is a kind of bleach, so it's best to avoid getting it on your hair, clothes, or sheets. You should also avoid getting too much sun while you're using it.

#### Gels and creams you can get from your doctor

**Azelaic acid** (brand name is Skinoren) is similar to benzoyl peroxide, but you need a prescription from your doctor to get it. It seems to reduce the number of spots people

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have, but some of the research isn't very good, so we can't be sure. Side effects include itching, a burning feeling, and red or scaly skin. But you may be less likely to get side effects from azelaic acid than you are with benzoyl peroxide.

Or your doctor might suggest **antibiotic creams and gels**. Some examples are clindamycin (brand names include Dalacin T and Zindaclin) and erythromycin (Stiemycin). They kill the bacteria that can make your spots red and inflamed. People have fewer red spots after using an antibiotic cream for between four and 12 weeks. But antibiotic creams probably won't affect any blackheads or whiteheads you have.

The research doesn't give much information on side effects. A few people got minor skin irritation or diarrhoea. But some studies found that antibiotic creams didn't cause any more side effects than a dummy cream (a placebo).

**Retinoid creams** can also be used to treat acne. They help to unblock your pores. Retinoid creams include tretinoin (Retin-A), adapalene (Differin), and isotretinoin (Isotrex). People have fewer spots after using them for about 12 weeks. Some people get side effects that are similar to sunburn, like red or peeling skin. But these will probably settle down after a few weeks.

You have to take care when using retinoid creams or gels. They can make you more sensitive to sunlight, so you should cover up or use sunscreen if you're out in the sun. And you shouldn't use this treatment if you're pregnant or trying to get pregnant.

### Tablets you can get from your doctor

If creams don't help you, your doctor may suggest you try **antibiotic tablets**. These might be erythromycin (Erymax and Erythrocin), doxycycline (Vibramycin), or tetracycline. They can reduce the number of inflamed spots people have. Some people's acne clears up completely after six months. But tablets have more side effects than creams.

Side effects include diarrhoea, an upset stomach, nausea, and vomiting. In one study of erythromycin, 14 in 100 people had these problems. You can't take some antibiotics if you're pregnant.

If you have very severe acne, or other treatments haven't worked, your doctor may suggest isotretinoin tablets (Roaccutane). They stop your skin making as much oil. This can reduce the number of spots you have, or even cure your acne. But isotretinoin tablets can have serious side effects. They can cause birth defects, so you can't take them if you're pregnant or trying to get pregnant. They can also cause dry skin, nosebleeds, aches, and blood in your urine. And isotretinoin can make you more sensitive to sunlight, so you should use sunscreen while you're taking it.

A type of **contraceptive pill**, called co-cyprindiol (Dianette) can help women with acne. Your doctor may suggest it if you want to take the contraceptive pill anyway. But co-cyprindiol is only recommended for severe acne, and if other treatments haven't worked. That's because, in rare cases, it can cause blood clots as a side effect. Blood clots can be very dangerous.

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### What will happen to me?

Acne usually goes away as you get older, although it can last for several years. But you don't need to wait this long. Treatments can help you get rid of acne in a few months.

If one treatment doesn't help you, it's worth going back to your doctor. There may be another treatment that works better for you.

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