

Acne

Acne (acne vulgaris) is a skin condition that affects most people at some point in their lives to some extent. It can develop anywhere on the skin, but occurs most often on the face, back and chest. Although acne regularly affects teenagers, it is not uncommon to experience outbreaks into adulthood.

Women suffer acne far more than men, which supports the idea that acne is related to fluctuating hormone levels. There is also a hereditary element to acne, so if your mother and father suffer, then it is likely you will too.

Acne affects around **85%** of teenagers and **20%** of adults in the UK, and it is thought that 3.5 million visits are made to the GP each year in the UK with acne symptoms.

How Does Acne Form?

The root cause of acne is hormonal changes causing the sebaceous glands to produce an excessive amount of sebum.

Once on the skin's surface, the excess sebum then mixes with dry skin cells and creates a thick sludge like substance. This forms a soft plug at the top of the pore, **blocking** it and causing a subsequent build-up of sebum beneath the surface.

The growing blockage stimulates **bacterial growth** which in turn attracts white blood cells to fight the infection.

The presence of white blood cells gives rise to **inflammation** which subsides once the infection has been dealt with.

Types of Acne

Blackheads – small black or yellowish spots that sit within the skin, so are not raised or inflamed. The colour is a result of sebum mixing with dead skin cells and bacteria. Blackheads are commonly formed around the nose and chin area.

Whiteheads – similar to blackheads, but the pores are closed so the spot forms the characteristic raised inflamed appearance with a white plug.

Papules – small painful red lumps.

Pustules – like papules but with a white hardened pus plug.

Nodules – hard painful lumps that form in the deeper layers of the skin and do not have a clear opening as the surface of the skin.

Cysts – these look similar to boils and are large pus-filled lumps.

If you think you suffer from nodules or cystic acne, consult your GP for advice, as they can cause long-term scarring.

Acne Treatments

Over-the-counter products from the chemist will often include ingredients such as benzoyl peroxide (a mild bleach) and salicylic acid (an organic acid). GP prescribed solutions for acne include antibiotics and, for women, the combined contraceptive pill. These treatments can be very harsh for sensitive skin, so you may choose to avoid them if your skin becomes dry, flaky or sensitized, and look for more gentle, natural alternatives.



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