

# Acne

## UNION AVENUE PEDIATRICS

Pimples are one of the unfortunate parts of growing up, and jokes about pimply youths and pock-marked adults are no help. Whiteheads, blackheads and red bumps on the face and shoulders, starting in adolescence, are due to an overactivity and plugging of the oil glands caused by the normal increase in hormone levels. While keeping the skin clean will help to prevent secondary infection, the pimples are not caused either by dirt or germs. Though occasional people with acne may profess that a big intake of sweets, chocolate, or fried foods will cause a new crop of pimples, diet is not the cause of acne, and in most young people it has little or no effect on it.

Acne to some degree is found in 90% of teenagers. It usually improves by the time a person is in their 20's. Meantime we should try to prevent the pimples from becoming unsightly, and to prevent pits and scars from developing. Other complications of acne are rare, though some who have it will also have a tendency to develop boils and other skin infections.

Nothing will cure acne, but good skin care is the first step in keeping it under control. Wash the face twice a day using a mild soap such as unscented Dove. Avoid colored and perfumed face soaps and any soap which seems harsh or irritating to you. Use a clean towel and washcloth every two days, and do not share towels or washcloths. Comb hair away from the forehead and keep it short at the neck to allow air to get to the skin in these areas. Picking the pimples only delays healing and increases the risk of introducing secondary infection. Don't use oily or greasy preparations on your face. If you must use cover-up cosmetics, use water-based ones and wash them off at bedtime. Anything that blocks the pores should not be used!

Pimples and red swollen bumps occur because of accumulation of secretions and skin germs in the plugged oil glands. Benzoyl peroxide 5% lotion or gel is a good preparation to open the pimples and kill the bacteria. Ask your pharmacist if you need help in choosing a brand. It should be applied daily at bedtime. Redheads and blonds should use it only every other day at first. An amount the size of a pea should cover most of your face. If your skin becomes red or peels, you are using too much or applying it too often, so you should slow down. You may need to continue using benzoyl peroxide for several years. You may need to reduce the frequency of use during periods of more sun exposure

While it is better in general to avoid "popping" pimples, young people often do it. If you are going to open a pimple, do it safely. Wait till it has come to a head. Wash your face and hands carefully. Sterilize a sewing needle with a flame or alcohol. Nick the surface of the pimple with the needle tip. The pus should run out without squeezing. Don't squeeze the sore, especially one on your nose, central forehead or mouth area. Squeezing sores in these central areas of the face can result in a serious spread of

infection by way of venous channels that lead back to the brain. Wipe away the pus and wash the area with soap and water. Scarring will not result from opening small pimples, but it can result from squeezing boils or large, tender, red bumps.

Blackheads are dried plugs in blocked-off oil glands. Benzoyl peroxide is excellent for removing the thickened skin that blocks the gland openings. It should be used as described above under treatment of pimples. Blackheads that are a cosmetic problem can sometimes be removed with a blackhead extractor, which is available at your drug store. Soak your face with a warm washcloth. Put the hole of the extractor spoon over the blackhead and apply firm pressure. This will usually open the gland and is more effective than anything you can do with your hands. If the blackhead does not come out the first time, don't try to force it.

If benzoyl peroxide irritates your skin, if you continue to get large red bumps, or if this treatment does not result in improvement within 6 or 8 weeks, you should call your doctor for an appointment so that we can consider using prescription medications for your acne.