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Face the acne facts



Although most people experience acne at some point in their life, many don't understand what causes those pesky pimples or how to effectively get rid of them.

Researchers' understanding of acne also changes over time. The impact of diet, for example, is a constant controversy.

So how can you avoid having a blemish on your breadth of acne knowledge? Start with this quick guide to zit wisdom.

Spot check

According to the Mayo Clinic, acne is a common skin disorder characterized by clogged pores and pimples that more than four out of five people between the ages of 12-24 develop at least once. Here are the four main categories of the acne we all love to hate:

Blackheads: Also known as open comedones, these are hair follicle openings that have become clogged with oil (sebum) and dead skin cells. The delightful mix of substances blocks the pores and oxidizes at the surface. The oxidation turns the oil and skin cells into a black colour.

Whiteheads: These wee pimples are similar to blackheads except that the hair follicles are closed instead of open. The clogged oil and dead skin cells blocking the follicle doesn't go through the oxidizing process and remains white.

Pimples: These are the red, raised bumps that sometimes contain pus (a lovely description, we know). The infection is caused by excess bacteria in the hair follicle.

Cysts: These thick bumps beneath the surface of the skin are formed by a build up of oil and bacteria deep within the hair follicle. Cysts are often painful and can cause scarring.

See spot form

Acne doesn't discriminate. Almost everyone stands a chance of donning a not-so-lovely pimple or two in their life. In large part because of hormones, teenagers, women two to seven days before their period, pregnant women and people on certain medications face a greater chance of developing acne. But don't think you're spared if you don't fall into one of these categories. Adult men and non-pregnant women can also develop acne.

There are a number of factors that cause acne, including overproduction of sebum, irregular shedding of skin cells and bacteria.

The tricky part in treating acne is pinpointing the cause of increased oil production. Contributing factors include stress, hormone fluctuations, genetics and [food \(although debatable\)](#).

Despite the old wives tales you might have heard growing up, acne is not caused by poor hygiene and is not contagious.

"Some people think it's contagious, especially if they have pimples with pus, but that's not true," says Lyn Guenther, a professor of dermatology at the University of Western Ontario, medical director of The Guenther Dermatology Research Centre in London, Ontario and medical editor of the Dermatology Times of Canada.

Guenther adds that acne isn't caused by eating chocolate or fried or fatty foods. "For the vast majority, diet doesn't make a difference," she says.

See spot vanish

Treatments depend on the severity of your acne.

"If you have mild acne, some blackheads or just a few pimples, it's okay to treat the condition on your own," says Peter Vignjevic, an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Vignjevic adds that over-the-counter washes, cleansers or moisturizers that contain benzoyl peroxide, glycolic acid and/or salicylic acid are your best bets to treat your acne.

You should clean your face twice a day with lukewarm water. But don't scrub your gentle skin since that will further irritate the acne.

If your over-the-counter products aren't working, or your acne is worsening, [consider visiting your doctor or dermatologist](#).

For women, oral contraceptives can help regulate hormones and are often used as a treatment for acne.

You also need to avoid touching your face too much or picking at the pimples. This will make your acne worse and cause scarring.

And remember: Stress can also make your acne worse, so try not to worry about your complexion too much.