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Article Link: <http://teens.webmd.com/girls-puberty-10/girls-teen-acne>

What Girls Need to Know About Growing Up

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Teen Acne and How to Treat It

WebMD Feature

By Camille Peri

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First, the good news: Some of the biggest celebrities suffered through acne – including Cameron Diaz and Brad Pitt. Now the better news: *You* don't have to suffer through it because acne treatment has made some huge advances in the last 25 years.

Many people, even well meaning parents, still think acne is just a phase kids go through. "Some parents say, 'I had pimples too. Just suck it up,'" says New York City dermatologist and psychiatrist Amy Wechsler, MD. "But there are many different options for keeping acne at bay. So teenagers should know that they're not alone and there's help out there."

Whether you get an occasional zit or full-blown breakouts, whether you can manage your acne with over-the-counter (OTC) treatments or should see a dermatologist, this article gives you the up-to-the-minute scientific info on acne and how to treat it. You'll also learn a three-minute skincare regimen, how to do pimple damage control on a big day, and some special acne issues for people of color.

Intro to Teen Acne: Why Do Teenagers Get Zits?

Acne is caused when a hair follicle get clogged with an oil called sebum and skin cells. Skin bacteria thrive and multiply in sebum, causing inflammation. Some acne consists of simple blackheads and whiteheads. Inflammation within the pore causes a pimple (also called a "papule") or a pus-filled pimple ("pustule"), depending on how deep it is. If it's really deep, it can cause a painful cyst -- and scarring.

Surging hormones called androgens boost sebum production and enlarge these glands, which is why 85% of teenagers get acne. Hormone fluctuations are also why girls sometimes break out before their periods.

Acne can also run in families. If one of your parents or grandparents had bad acne, you may also.

Can Junk Food or Stress Cause Teen Acne?

People may tell you that eating French fries, chocolate, or pizza causes acne. But according to the American Academy of Dermatology, there is no proven link between diet and acne.

"Kids with acne should eat in a healthful way because it's better for their bodies in general," Wechsler says. "But there have been no studies to show that it's better for your skin."

How about the stress of school and teenage life? Stress does not cause acne, but it can make it worse. That's why teens often wake up on the morning of their bat mitzvahs, Sweet 16 parties, or senior pictures with a big fat ugly pimple.

"Depression, stress, and anxiety all affect hormones and hormones affect acne by increasing oil production," says Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD, a dermatologist in private practice in Egan, Minn., who also teaches dermatology at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

Of course, a bad case of acne can also make you stressed and depressed. Studies show that teen acne can mess with teenagers' self-confidence and make them less social. In a survey done by the American Medical Association, 18% of teens said they were depressed about their acne. But only 16% had seen their doctor or a dermatologist for help.

Acne Treatment: Where to Start

Begin your acne plan-of-attack good skin care. Wash your face with a gentle cleanser. Don't pick at your face. When you do break out, use an OTC topical treatment -- a gel, lotion, or cream. Benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid are some of the active ingredients you should look for. "Products that contain salicylic acid unplug the pores and those with benzoyl peroxide are mild anti-inflammatories and also kill or stop bacteria from growing," Crutchfield says.

"I prefer salicylic acid in a 2% formulation for spot treatment and benzoyl peroxide as a wash in a 2½% formulation for the face," Wechsler tells WebMD. "You can go higher -- up to 10% -- for acne on the chest and back."

If you are a person of color, you may need to eliminate or limit your use of benzoyl peroxide, however, because it can decolorize the skin. It's best to use it under a dermatologist's supervision.

All teens should beware of any product promising overnight results. There are no immediate treatments or cures for acne. Acne treatments -- OTC or prescription -- may take several weeks of regular use to kick in. "You have to use it on a regular basis and make a two-month commitment," Crutchfield says. "Then decide if it's working."

Only use moisturizers, makeup, sunscreen, and even hair care products that say "oil free," "nonacnegenic," or "non-comedogenic."

"Some people say you can't moisturize if you have acne," Wechsler says. "But you should moisturize. Many acne treatments are drying. If you over-dry the skin, it will irritate it, and that will cause more inflammation and more breakouts."

A 3-Minute Skincare Routine for Your Face

Wechsler suggests this basic skin care regimen:

1. Gently wash your face with your fingertips in lukewarm [not hot] water twice a day. (Don't scrub with a washcloth.) Use a gentle non-soap cleanser one time and a benzoyl peroxide wash the other time.
2. Do a spot treatment with a salicylic acid product after you wash your face with cleanser. Skip this step when you use a benzoyl peroxide wash.
3. Apply a non-comedogenic moisturizer. For daytime, use one with a minimum SPF of 30.

Acne from Sports and Hair Products

Sports are generally good for your complexion, Wechsler says. However, if you wear a helmet or even a baseball cap for your sport, it can make acne worse.

"When there's something sitting on your head with sweat, you tend to break out underneath it," Wechsler says. If you have body acne, staying in sweaty clothes can also wreak havoc.

Get sweaty clothes off as soon as possible after sports and jump in the shower. If you wear a helmet with a chin strap, wipe the chinstrap down with alcohol after use or change it often. "I usually give parents that job," Wechsler says.

Oil-containing gels and ointments such as pomades can also clog pores, causing acne on areas near the hair, such as the forehead or scalp. If you use one, try applying it an inch behind your hairline or just on the ends of your hair, or avoid using it. If your acne in that area doesn't clear up, see a dermatologist.

Special Acne Issues for People of Color

People of color sometimes have another acne-related problem to contend with: "post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation" -- a.k.a, dark spots that blemishes can leave behind after

they're healed. Usually, dark spots disappear over time, but teens who get them know they can lower your self-esteem as much as acne.

There are OTC and prescription topical skin-lightening products to deal with dark spots, or a dermatologist may suggest other treatments, such as retinoids. These work to unclog pores, allowing topical treatments to fight acne more effectively.

A longer lasting, though uncommon, problem is keloids -- raised scars that are larger than the original blemish and tough to get rid of.

"In African-Americans, as well as Asians and Hispanics to some degree, acne on the chest and back can turn into really bad keloids," Crutchfield says. "It's a good idea to be aggressive in treating acne to prevent these, especially if you have a history of keloid scars or if acne keloid scarring on the chest and back runs in your family."

Acne Treatment: When to See a Dermatologist

It's a good idea to see a dermatologist if:

- OTC treatments don't seem to be working after several weeks
- You have any pimples that are leaving scars
- Your family has a strong history of bad acne, such as if an older sibling had acne that required care from a dermatologist
- Acne is affecting your self-esteem

Your dermatologist may give you a prescription-strength benzoyl peroxide, salicylic acid product, azelaic acid, alpha hydroxyl acids, or a topical retinoid. For severe cystic acne, dermatologists may prescribe Isotretinoin, a powerful oral retinoid.

Other ways that dermatologists treat acne include:

- Topical or oral antibiotics and antimicrobials
- Birth control pills
- Corticosteroid injections (for large, painful acne lesions)
- Light/Lasers (to help kill bacteria and stop oil production)
- Chemical peels and microdermabrasion
- Heat treatments (pulses of targeted heat that help clear bacteria).
- A combination of treatments

A big goal of acne treatment is to prevent scars. However, if you have acne scars, they can be treated with techniques such as laser resurfacing, dermabrasion, chemical peels, surgery, and skin fillers.

Teen Acne: Pimple SOS

Having a long-term acne strategy is good, but what can you do when you wake up with a big pimple on a big day? Most important, don't pick at it. Instead, Wechsler suggests this:

1. Apply a warm compress for 10 minutes.
2. Apply gentle, even pressure to the blemish on both sides with two cotton swabs. If anything is ready to come out, it will then.
3. If the blemish doesn't drain, apply an ice pack.

"You can also put a little bit of 1% hydrocortisone cream on as an emergency measure, but it's not something you should do all the time for acne," Wechsler adds.

Crutchfield suggests doing a spot treatment with a blemish eraser stick. Some come with salicylic acid on one end and a concealer on the other, so you can spot-treat and conceal.

6 More Tips for Acne-Free Living

These strategies may also help reduce acne:

Avoid alcohol. Don't use skin care products that contain alcohol. Alcohol dries out the skin, irritating it. (Drinking a lot of alcohol can also dehydrate your cells, another good reason to avoid drinking at parties.)

Don't overdo skin care. "Overscrubbing and using too many products are the biggest problems I see with teenagers," Wechsler says. "Using any more than two acne products is just going to dry you out and make it worse."

Don't pick, scratch, pop, or squeeze blemishes. It can make acne worse or cause scars.

Stay away from cigarette smoke. This includes secondhand smoke. "Smoking is absolute poison for the skin," Crutchfield says. "If you smoke heavily on a regular basis, you may be able to improve acne but you probably won't clear it."

De-stress. Breathing exercises, yoga, and meditation are a few of the techniques that can help relieve stress, which may aggravate acne. If you're studying like crazy, take a break to visit a friend or take a walk to get some fresh air.

Wash your hair daily if it's oily. This will keep the oil from getting on your skin.

The bottom line, says Crutchfield: "Eat a well balanced diet, take a multi-vitamin, be gentle with your skin, and treat acne early."

Reviewed by [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#) on August 23, 2010

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