

Information and Resources

Top Teen Skin Problems – and How To Solve Them

The teen years can be filled with angst – the last thing you need is troubled skin. WebMD asked the experts for solutions to the most common teen skin problems.

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WebMD Feature

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From breakouts that come out of the blue, to those funky finger warts that makes you feel like everyone's staring, to an oily complexion that shines out of control, the teen years can be filled with skin problems.

If you're like many teens, you probably feel you're the only one who's affected. But the truth is that you're not – skin problems are common in teens.

"As a dermatologist, I understand how frustrating and embarrassing certain teen skin problems are," says Joel Schlessinger, MD, president-elect of the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery. "But it's important to remember that you're not alone and that is always a way to make it better – you just have to find the right treatment path."

To help you do just that, WebMD turned to several experts for advice on some of the most common teen skin problems.

Teen Skin Problem No. 1: Acne

As hormone levels rise and bodies change, skin reacts. For some teens, it's an occasional pimple or blemish. For girls, it can occur right before each menstrual cycle.

For other teens, though, breakouts go far beyond a zit or two, to create a chronic condition known as acne. It's characterized by whiteheads, blackheads, and, more frequently, pus-filled pimples.

"It usually develops in the central area of the cheeks and on the forehead, and it's almost universally caused by a hormone imbalance or a hypersensitivity to the robust hormonal activity going on the body during this time," says Doris J. Day, MD, author of *100 Questions and Answers About Acne*.

Day says that stresses associated with teen life can also be a contributing factor.

What can help? For many teens, over-the-counter acne treatments containing benzoyl peroxide and/or various acids in a cream, lotion or gel will do the trick. The key, however, may be to purchase several different products and rotate them.

"Very often your skin responds favorably, then all of a sudden the product stops working," says Schlessinger. "The way to deal with this is to have two or three products you like and switch off, using one for two to three months and then changing once breakouts are no longer controlled."

If acne doesn't clear -- or gets worse -- see a primary care practitioner or a dermatologist as soon as you can. Treatment includes professional-strength acne products, along with antibiotics. Special laser or other light treatments, as well as abrasive therapies, are available in dermatologists' offices, but these options are expensive.

And what about those occasional "just before the prom/Christmas vacation/school play" breakouts?

Barry Resnik, MD, dermatologist at Memorial Regional Hospital and Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood, Fla., offers this quick solution:

"Run a washcloth under hot water, and soak the pimple till cloth is cool, then apply topical acne medicine," he says. If you repeat this process two to three times a day, Resnik says, you may stop or hasten an outbreak.

For the "world's worst pimple," Resnik says, don't try to cover it with regular makeup. Instead, buy a compounded tinted drying lotion and use that to hide it and help speed healing.

Teen Skin Problem No. 2: Oily Skin

Although oily skin and acne often go hand-in-hand, this isn't always the case. Some teens suffer from oily skin alone.

If your complexion is oily but you're not breaking out, there are two treatment approaches.

"You can use topical treatments to 'mop up' the oil, or you can get to the root of the problem which is excess oil production, and shut it down – and both methods can work very well," says Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD, clinical associate professor of dermatology at the University of Minnesota Medical School Medical.

To mop it up, Crutchfield says, choose products containing alcohol, such as a "drying solution" that soaks up excess oil on the surface of the skin. You can also use a blotting product -- sheets of specially treated paper that you touch to your face to absorb oil.

Resnik often recommends an "oil inhibitor" like OC 8. "It utilizes an absorbent technology to reduce shine and it's very effective and suitable for all skin types," he says.

If none of these do the trick, Crutchfield says, professional laser treatments can help. He notes that the Aramis laser, for example, is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of oil production in acne.

"It actually interacts with the oil glands themselves to get them to be less active. In a sense, it causes them to 'go to sleep' for up to a year, so oil production is dramatically down," says Crutchfield.

When the glands "wake back up", in anywhere from a few months to a year, additional treatments can put them back to bed in no time.

What you don't want to do is wash your face excessively, trying to get rid of the oil.

"The 'squeaky clean' feeling people get from using soaps is derived from stripping the fatty oils from our skin, and is more harmful than good," says Resnik.

Instead, use a gentle cleanser and wash no more than twice a day.

Teen Skin Problem No. 3: Excess Sweating

Be it on the palms of your hands and soles of your feet, under your arms, in your scalp, or anywhere on your body, if you often find yourself drenched in perspiration, you're not alone. Doctors say this is a major issue for many teens.

The problem, says Resnik, can result from two distinct conditions. The first, he says, is caused by stress – with excess sweating most often occurring under the arms.

"For this situation, all you need is a maximum-strength antiperspirant like Maxim or Certain-Dri, which can really reduce perspiration output," he says.

They work by plugging the sweat ducts so the perspiration never reaches the skin. If over-the-counter antiperspirants don't seem to help, he says, your doctor can prescribe medical- strength products.

When heavy sweating occurs on a regular basis, you may be experiencing what doctors call "hyperhidrosis." This condition is characterized by excessive sweating on the palms, soles, and underarms, and sometimes, the face.

"This can be a terribly isolating condition for a teen -- so much so that many won't even bring it up their pediatrician or family doctor," says Resnik.

Treatment includes minimally invasive surgical treatments that target the sweat glands, as well as Botox -- the same substance used as a wrinkle treatment. In this case, tiny amounts of the purified botulinum A toxin is injected into sweat glands to block the release of a neurotransmitter or brain chemical called acetylcholine, which is linked to sweating.

The treatment lasts up to eight months, and can be repeated.

In addition, the American Academy of Dermatology also offers these tips to control excess perspiration:

Wear natural fibers like cotton, which are cooler and absorb sweat.

Use absorbent inner soles and try to alternate shoes, leaving a day in between wearings so they can dry out.

Avoid foods and drinks that seem to trigger sweating. These are different for everybody, but some doctors say they may include spicy dishes, or very hot liquids such as soups.

Finally, for the most severe cases of hyperhidrosis, surgery can be performed on the nerve bundles that control sweating. This is very specialized surgery, usually available only at major medical centers.

Teen Skin Problem No. 4: Warts

If you find yourself stuffing your hands in your pockets every chance you get, you may be trying to hide warts. These fleshy colored, or sometimes dark, lumps and bumps can grow under fingernails, on your fingers, on the backs of the hands, or on the soles of the feet. Caused by a virus, doctors say warts seems to impact teens the most.

"Warts are very common in teen years, and happen at a time when even a minor imperfection can seem to cause major problems," says Schlessinger.

There are many treatments for warts, says Schlessinger. They include freezing the growths with liquid nitrogen, or burning them off with a laser or a chemical treatment. While the treatments sometimes work, warts can come back.

The best way to avoid getting warts is to avoid biting your nails or injuring your hands. Skin that is injured appears to be more susceptible to the wart viruses.

Most warts go away without any treatment within about two years. And warts are not dangerous. But if you have warts that disturb you, your primary health care practitioner can discuss various treatment options with you.

Teen Skin Problem No. 5: Eczema/Atopic Dermatitis

Although more common in younger children, experts say that sometimes, these patches of dry, scaly, reddened skin follow kids into their teen years.

"Many teens involved in sports find their childhood eczema grows worse, frequently aggravated by trauma or by sporting equipment worn on the knees or ankles, for example," says Schlessinger.

Sometimes, a non-perfumed, heavy-duty moisturizer is all you need. Experts say this is particularly important if you shower after sports and go out into cold weather, which can further dry and irritate skin. Just apply the moisturizing lotion immediately after showering, bathing, or swimming.

"If a moisturizer doesn't help – or if the skin begins 'weeping,' oozing, or it becomes significantly red or itchy, it's time to see a dermatologist, who can prescribe medications that can help," says Schlessinger.

These include both topical and oral preparations, and prescription-strength moisturizers. Your primary-care provider can also prescribe such treatments.

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SOURCES: Joel Schlessinger, MD, president-elect, American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery; director, LovelySkin.com, Omaha, Neb. Doris J. Day, MD, clinical assistant professor, NYU School of Medicine; author, *100 Questions and Answers About Acne*. Barry Resnik, MD, dermatologist, Memorial Regional Hospital and Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, Hollywood, Fla. Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD, clinical associate professor of dermatology, University of Minnesota Medical School; medical director, Crutchfield Dermatology. American Academy of Dermatology website: "Excessive Sweating in Teens Can Cause Physical and Emotional Problems but Can be Treated Effectively" and "Beware of Warts."

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