

Acne (spots)

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from acne (spots). It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **What is acne?** Acne tends to start at puberty and leads to greasy skin and 'spots'. People may feel bad about themselves because of the way their skin looks, often at a time when they're already vulnerable.
- **How common is acne?** You're not alone – acne affects more than 8 out of 10 teenagers to some degree, and more frequently boys. Around one in three teenagers have acne bad enough to need treatment. In women, acne is more common around the time of their monthly periods.
- **What's causing it?** Acne is caused by inflamed skin glands on your face and upper trunk, sometimes caused through an infection. In *rare* cases, acne may be caused by an underlying medical condition, such as *polycystic ovary disease* (PCO) or other hormonal disorders. It's a myth that stress or certain foods (such as chocolate) cause acne – and acne is certainly not due to a lack of cleanliness!

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Duration** Acne is a long-term condition that may need immediate treatment for treating severely affected skin, and maintenance therapy to keep spots from recurring. In 7 out of 10 people, acne stops within five years – but some people may suffer lifelong.
- ✓ **Severity** Acne can vary from being mild and localised to severe and widespread.
- ✓ **Impact on your life** Acne can severely affect people's quality of life, regardless of how bad it is.
- ✓ **Tests** You won't need any tests unless your doctor suspects an underlying medical cause.

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What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Washing** Wash your face only once or twice a day with lukewarm water. Avoid strong or abrasive soaps and excessive scrubbing. Be aware that hot water and rough flannels can make symptoms worse rather than better.
- ✓ **Avoid squeezing** No matter how tempting, try not to squeeze spots, as this may cause scarring.
- ✓ **Over the counter creams, gels and lotions** Effective treatments are available to reduce and improve spots. They can also prevent or reduce scarring if started early. Ask your pharmacist for advice on available preparations. You need to continue treatment for at least six weeks before seeing any changes. If a treatment is effective, continue for at least four to six months. You may need to try different preparations until you find one that suits you. Some treatments may irritate your skin initially, so seek advice from your pharmacist if this is the case.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek advice from your pharmacist or GP if initial treatment with over the counter preparations doesn't work for you, if acne significantly impairs your quality of life, or if any of the following warning symptoms are present:

- **Severity** Your acne is really bad and you feel physically unwell because of it.
- **Pain** You develop painful spots that feel 'deep' in your skin.
- **Distress** You get distressed by your acne, and/or it affects your social life.
- **Scarring** You notice the beginning of scarring despite treatment.
- **Possible underlying medical causes** You suspect that you may have an underlying medical condition that causes your acne – for example, if you have additional symptoms such as infrequent or absent periods, excessive hair growth, or hair loss.

Where can I find out more?

Check out the **NHS Choices** website (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Acne/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) for more information on how you can treat and prevent acne. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms and advise on suitable treatments.