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Skin Problems & Treatments Health Center

Teen Acne Solutions

Doctors and patients explain how a variety of treatments let teens banish acne.

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WebMD Feature

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Getting ready to go anywhere -- school, out with friends, out to a party -- was a hassle during her high school years, recalls Sarah, now a 19-year-old college freshman in New York City.

The problem? Acne. "I hated not being able to just get out of the shower and go straight out," says Sarah, who asked that her last name not be used. Instead, she would carefully apply acne medication and then cover that up with makeup to camouflage the blemishes.

Her dedication to the dermatologist-recommended routine seemed futile at times, she says. "It was getting really frustrating. Nothing seemed to be working."

While the majority of teens may not have the severe acne that Sarah experienced, nearly 100% will have some acne -- ranging from an occasional breakout to chronic acne -- during adolescence. The skin problems can put a damper on social life and thwart self-confidence.

"It's not uncommon for a patient to come see me for the first time and have tears in their eyes," says Amy Derick, MD, a dermatologist in Barrington, Ill.

"Teens avoid school if they have lots of zits," says Cynthia Chen, MD, a resident in dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco, who surveyed teens with acne about their feelings.

The good news: research on skin conditions such as acne has progressed greatly even in the past 10 years, with more treatment options for acne than ever before.

The not-so-good news? Obstacles to treatment are common, dermatologists say, and that slows resolution of the skin problems.

Acne Treatments: A Host of Solutions

During the past decade, the number of acne treatments has expanded greatly, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Among the significant advances:

Newer topical products such as retinoids (derived from vitamin A), help unplug follicles. Although retinoids can irritate skin, new ones are made for different types of skin and promise to be less irritating.

Combination treatments are becoming more common, with many doctors prescribing a topical retinoid together with a topical antimicrobial or an oral antibiotic to fight bacteria. Combination creams, putting ingredients such as the cleansing agent benzoyl peroxide and the antibiotic clindamycin in one product, are more common.

Prescribing **oral contraceptives** for teenage girls with acne is becoming more accepted. At low doses, some types of birth control pills may help clear acne.

Oral isotretinoin (or Accutane) can help in severe cases that haven't responded to other medications. Because the drug has been associated with depression and suicidal thoughts, patients who use it are closely followed for any changes in mood. Blood tests monitor any potential adverse effects, such as elevated cholesterol levels.

When Should You Seek Treatment for Acne?

Even with the ever-expanding treatment arsenal, getting acne relief isn't typically easy or quick. Teens and parents often disagree about whether professional help is needed and, if so, which treatment is best.

When Should You Seek Treatment for Acne? continued...

Alex Girard of Barrington, Ill., began having breakouts at age 13. "It didn't really bother me that much but my mom suggested I should go get it checked out," he says.

Chris, his mother, says she had bad acne as a teen and then again as an adult. (She went on oral isotretinoin as a teen and again after her third child was born and her acne cleared.) "Knowing I had bad skin and my husband also did, we figured, they are doomed," Chris says about their children.

She pressed, and Alex decided it was a good idea. His mother's philosophy: "You don't have to have acne today."

Derick, who treated Alex, says parents are typically more aware that treatments have progressed -- and that parents who have suffered themselves as teens tend to seek help sooner.

What to Do When Parents and Teens Disagree on Acne Treatment

Sarah and her mother initially disagreed on the best treatment. Sarah wanted to give oral isotretinoin a try, but her mom resisted. "My mom was hesitant at first due to the warnings," she says. Women are required to use two forms of birth control while on the drug, usually taken for about six months, because the drug is associated with birth defects and miscarriage if the woman becomes pregnant while taking it.

But after Sarah's dermatologist, Diane Berson, MD, a New York City practitioner, explained everything, it became less scary, Sarah says. Her mother talked at length with her daughter's adolescent medicine doctor about it. "She was very reassuring," Sarah's mother says.

With close monitoring, Berson and Derick agree, it's an extremely effective drug.

It's important for teens and their parents to talk jointly with the doctor about all acne treatments. Ask questions about any concern. With so many acne treatments on the market, there's sure to be one that's effective and comfortable for both the teen and the parents.

Besides decisions on which treatment is best and when to see a dermatologist, there are several other obstacles to acne treatment, according to patients, parents, and dermatologists. Knowing about them -- and how to overcome them -- can speed results.

Have Patience During 'Trial-and-Error' Phase of Acne Treatment

With multiple remedies, some of them new, doctors often use "trial-and-error" to figure out what medicine works for which person. And before even seeing a dermatologist, many teens and their parents conduct their own trial-and-error experiments with drugstore acne remedies.

Alec, 22, of San Francisco, did just that for a while. When puberty hit, so did the acne, he recalls. Off to the drugstore he went. "I tried everything I could find," he says, buying over-the-counter acne treatments. But nothing gave him clear skin.

So he and his mother checked in at a teen clinic, where the doctor recommended a prescription cream that combined benzoyl peroxide with the antibiotic clindamycin. The combination cream worked well for Alec.

Have Patience During 'Trial-and-Error' Phase of Acne Treatment continued...

As he got older and had fewer blemishes, Alec switched to a 10% benzoyl peroxide cream available over the counter, which he continues to use to this day. "I use the benzoyl peroxide every night," he says. He's also fairly religious about washing his face before bed. The payoff? His skin is mostly clear. "I probably have one pimple a week." That, he can live with.

Alex Girard knows all about trial-and-error, too. He went to three dermatologists before seeing Derick, and tried everything they prescribed, without much success. "They kept saying 'try this, try that,'" remembers his mother. He tried an oral antibiotic, and two acne creams. "Nothing seemed to help," recalls his mom.

However, with newer products geared to skin type, teens can expect a shorter trial-and-error period. Working with his doctor, Alex was able to find a treatment that -- after six months -- finally cleared his acne.

Stick With Your Acne Treatment Plan

It takes time for most acne treatments to work -- and teens often stop using acne medication before it's had a chance to work, dermatologists say. Especially boys. "I don't want to generalize, but females are more attuned to taking care of their skin and having a daily routine," says Berson, who is also an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York.

The compliance issue "causes frustration between parents and children," says Chen. And that frustration can cause parents to nag their teens about using the medications.

Nagging rarely works with teens, as most parents soon realize. Instead, doctors suggest that parents encourage the teen to use acne medicine daily as directed, but leave it to the teen to follow through. Most teens begin to use their acne medicine regularly once they're fed up with acne.

"I was getting so frustrated having bad skin that I was willing to do anything I could to get good skin," says Sarah.

Get the Truth About Acne and Your Diet

Myths about acne persist. Parents may believe one thing and teens another -- and often parents are wrong.

Parents may pass on some of the old myths about acne that flourished as truth during their teenage years. One persistent myth: you get acne from chocolate or greasy foods.

In fact, studies have not found a link between acne and foods such as chocolate, french fries, and pizza, according to the American Academy of Dermatology.

The link between acne and foods "is very controversial," Derick says.

"Studies have come out recently, saying a high-sugar diet is implicated," she says, but "I don't think the data is good enough to say 'Lay off sugar.'"

Other studies are looking at possible links between milk and acne, and between the traditional Western Diet -- full of refined carbohydrates -- and acne. The bottom line: more research is needed to prove the links.

What diet tips should a teen concerned about acne follow? Derick recommends eating an overall healthy diet and drinking plenty of water to hydrate your skin.

Don't Over-wash Your Face

Another common myth: "Teens feel acne is caused by dirty skin," Berson says. Not so, she says. Rather, hormonal changes leading to excess oil production are to blame.

"They feel if they are vigilant and obsessive about cleaning, it will help," Berson says. In fact, she says, "Too much cleaning and abrasive cleaners will make the skin more irritated."

She recommends twice-a-day gentle cleaning of the face.

Berson also regularly warns teens with acne: "Don't pick." It doesn't make blemishes better, she warns, and makes it more likely they will become inflamed.

Give Your Acne Treatment Enough Time to Work

"Teenagers want to see results immediately," Berson says. But even the very best acne treatments take time to clear your skin.

"The reality is it can take a good four to eight weeks [to see results] when you start a regimen, depending on how severe the acne is to begin with," she says. And it can often take a few months to totally clear your skin.

Berson also warns teens about another surprising bump in the road: "You might get worse before you get better." She cautions them not to stop the medicine if it's getting worse. "Stick with it until you are back at your follow-up exam," she says. If teens have a skin reaction, she adds, they should check in with the dermatologist sooner.

Remember, Acne Treatment Pays Off in Many Ways

When acne treatment works -- and the majority of patients so get relief if they adhere to the treatment plan -- teens say they feel more confident in many ways.

"I don't have to worry about having to cover up my blemishes," says Sarah, who as a college freshman gets an occasional breakout now and then. Her friends who didn't know her before, she says, "can't imagine that I had bad skin."

Alex's mother Chris says her son's skin is now very clear, calling the results "excellent."

How does Alex think it feels to be pimple-free? "Really good," he acknowledges. Then he laughs. "My friends ask, 'What happened to all your zits?'"

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