

PIMPLES / ZITS / ACNE VULGARIS / COMEDONES /
BLACKHEADS / WHITEHEADS

Acne

CATEGORY:

Follicular disorder

LOOKS LIKE:

Blocked skin pores and spots on the skin that may be red, swollen, inflamed, or contain pus

FEELS LIKE:

Bumpy, rough, sometimes painful

OUTLOOK:

Often settles after adolescence or young adulthood

LOCATION:

Most commonly affects the face, neck, shoulders, and upper chest / back / arms



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Visible whiteheads on the forehead



Acne showing multiple blackheads



Mild acne & greasy skin on the forehead - whiteheads, blackheads and papules can be seen



Severe facial acne with large papules (bumps) and pustules



Papulopustular acne and post-inflammatory skin colour changes



Moderate back acne with numerous papules and pustules

What is it?

Acne is a common condition where hair follicles in the skin become blocked. This leads to visibly plugged pores (blackheads) or red and swollen (inflamed) 'pimples'.

Acne is most often seen in teenagers and young adults, but can also come up in children and older adults.

Acne

CAUSES —

The exact reason why acne affects some people more than others is not completely understood. It is likely due to a combination of factors such as:

- **Genetics** — more common in some families
- **Bacteria** — a stronger immune response to bacteria that normally live on the skin
- **Hormonal changes** — eg, menstrual cycle, or in polycystic ovarian syndrome
- **Medications** — such as steroids, some anti-seizure medications, and medications that weaken the immune system.

Acne flare-ups may also be triggered by:

- **Environment** eg, humidity
- **Diet** eg, sugar-rich foods or dairy products
- **Stress**
- **Smoking cigarettes**
- **Heavy use of makeup and cosmetics**
- **Repeated skin trauma** (eg, harsh soaps, scrubbing).

Acne is not caused by having dirty skin or poor hygiene. It isn't contagious, but sharing products such as makeup brushes can transfer oils, skin cells, and bacteria between people.

SYMPTOMS —

Acne most often affects the face, neck, chest, upper back, and upper arms — areas where more oil (sebaceous) glands are found.

People with acne may have:

- **Blackheads** (open comedones) — visible dark plugs of hardened oily material in pores
- **Whiteheads** (closed comedones) — small, white, bumps on the skin
- **Pustules** — red, swollen, pus-filled blisters
- **Cysts** — painful bumps underneath the skin.

In people with black or brown skin, redness may be less obvious, and inflammation may look more purple, grey, or a darker tone.

DIAGNOSIS —

Acne is diagnosed by your healthcare professional asking some questions and assessing your skin. Sometimes tests are done, such as **skin swabs** if an infection is suspected, or **blood tests** to check hormone levels in females.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

Skin care measures that can be helpful if you are prone to acne include:

- **Avoiding products with oil or harsh chemicals**
- **Removing make-up regularly**
- **Avoiding picking/squeezing spots**
- **Quitting cigarette smoking.**

Treatment options may include:

- **Antiseptic skin washes** (eg, salicylic acid)
- **Creams, lotions or gels** (eg, benzoyl peroxide or azelaic acid)

- **Antibiotics** (eg, doxycycline or erythromycin)
- **Hormonal treatments** (eg, the combined contraceptive pill)
- **Vitamin A products** (retinoids), either topical (eg, tretinoin or adapalene) or oral (eg, isotretinoin)
- **Light or laser therapy.**

It can take at least 4–6 weeks for treatments to start making a noticeable difference.

COMPLICATIONS —

- **Scarring or skin colour changes** (eg, hyperpigmented/dark spots).
- **Stress and effects on mood, anxiety, and self-confidence.**
- **Gram-negative folliculitis** — an infection often mistaken for worsening acne. Frequent or long-term use of antibiotics that normally help acne can cause this.

OUTCOME —

It is common to have flare-ups of acne off and on for several years, most often starting as a teenager. Acne tends to improve after the age of 25 years, although it may last longer. Fortunately, a range of treatment options are available.



MORE INFORMATION —

www.dermnetnz.org/topics/acne



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