Understanding Acne: Causes, Treatment, and When to Seek Help

Acne is one of the most common skin conditions, affecting people of all ages. It develops when hair follicles become clogged with oil, dead skin cells, and other substances. This can lead to blackheads, whiteheads, pimples, and, in some cases, deeper and more painful bumps. Acne most often appears on the face, but it can also affect the chest, back, shoulders, and other areas of the body.

Although acne is especially common during the teenage years, adults can experience acne as well. Hormonal changes during puberty can increase oil production, making breakouts more likely. Hormonal fluctuations can also contribute to acne in adults, including during certain stages of the menstrual cycle. Other factors, such as genetics, stress, certain medications, and skincare or hair-care products that clog pores, may also play a role. It is important to remember that having acne does not mean your skin is dirty or that you are doing something wrong. Acne is a medical skin condition with several contributing factors.

What Causes Acne?

Acne develops through a combination of factors. One of the main contributors is excess oil, also known as sebum. When the skin produces too much oil, it can combine with dead skin cells and clog hair follicles. Once a pore becomes clogged, it can develop into a blackhead or whitehead. Bacteria that normally live on the skin can also contribute to inflammation within clogged pores. This may result in red, swollen pimples. In some people, inflammation can occur deeper in the skin, leading to painful nodules or cysts.

Hormones can also influence acne. During puberty, hormonal changes can increase oil production. Adults may also experience hormonal acne, particularly during periods of hormonal fluctuation. Genetics can play a role as well, meaning that people with a family history of acne may be more likely to develop it. Certain medications and products may also contribute to breakouts. Some skincare, haircare, and cosmetic products can clog pores, particularly if they are not labeled as non-comedogenic.

How Can You Care for Acne-Prone Skin?

Taking care of acne usually starts with a simple and consistent skin-care routine. Washing your face gently twice a day and after sweating can help remove excess oil and impurities without unnecessarily irritating your skin. Avoid scrubbing or using rough exfoliating products, as these can make irritated skin feel worse. Common over-the-counter acne treatments include benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid. Benzoyl peroxide can help reduce acne-causing bacteria and inflammation, while salicylic acid helps remove dead skin cells and clear clogged pores.

When starting an acne treatment, it is often helpful to begin slowly. Some products can cause dryness, redness, peeling, or irritation, particularly when they are first introduced. Follow

the product's directions and give your skin time to adjust. Using several new acne products at once can make it difficult to determine which product is helping or causing irritation.

Daily sun protection is important as well. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher, particularly when using acne treatments that may make your skin more sensitive to the sun. Sun protection can also help reduce the chance that dark marks left behind after acne become more noticeable.

When Should You See a Dermatologist?

Acne treatment takes time, so patience and consistency are important. You may not see improvement right away, and changing treatments too frequently can irritate your skin. However, if over-the-counter products are not helping after several weeks, it may be time to talk with a healthcare professional or dermatologist. Prescription treatments may include topical retinoids, which help prevent clogged pores and promote the normal shedding of skin cells. Prescription medications may also include topical or oral antibiotics when appropriate.

At Calvert dermatology we can evaluate the type and severity of your acne and develop a treatment plan based on your skin, the type of acne you have and whether you are developing scars. The goal of treatment is not only to clear existing breakouts but also to prevent new ones from developing and reduce the risk of long-term scarring.

Can Acne Cause Scars?

Some types of acne can leave permanent scars, particularly when inflammation occurs deep within the skin. Picking, squeezing, or popping pimples can increase the risk of scarring and may also cause additional irritation or discoloration. If you have painful, deep pimples or notice that your acne is leaving scars, consider seeing a dermatologist sooner rather than waiting for the acne to improve on its own. Early treatment may help reduce inflammation and prevent additional breakouts.

Acne can also leave behind flat areas of discoloration after a pimple heals. These marks are not necessarily scars and may gradually fade over time. A dermatologist can help determine whether you are dealing with acne scarring, discoloration, or both and discuss appropriate treatment options.

The Bottom Line

Acne is common and treatable, and having acne does not mean that your skin is dirty or that you have done something wrong. Hormones, genetics, oil production, inflammation, certain medications, and products that clog pores can all contribute to breakouts.

A gentle and consistent skin-care routine can be a helpful starting point. Over-the-counter ingredients such as benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid can help manage mild acne, while

prescription treatments may be appropriate for persistent, painful, or more severe breakouts. If your acne is not improving, or is leaving scars, consider talking with a dermatologist. Professional treatment can help control breakouts, prevent new acne from developing, and reduce the risk of long-term scarring.

References

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