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Acne Health Center

10 Myths and Facts About Adult Acne

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WebMD Feature

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If you lived with acne as a teenager, you probably heard all sorts of advice about why you developed acne and what you should do about it. "You eat too many potato chips!" "You don't wash your face enough!" "Cut down on the chocolate!"

The fact is that most of what you thought you knew about acne as a teen -- and much of what you may think you know about adult acne -- is probably a myth. Here are some common acne myths.

Acne Myth 1: Adults don't get acne.

Not true. Surveys have found that significant numbers of adults are still getting acne into their 30s, 40s, and even 50s. Acne may look different when you're 36 than it did when you were 16 -- it's more likely to be reddish nodules around your mouth and jaw, rather than whiteheads and blackheads scattered all over your forehead, nose, and cheeks -- but it's acne all the same.

Acne Myth 2: Eating chocolate and drinking soda gives you acne.

"The diet controversy over acne goes on," says Amy Derick, MD, FAAD, a dermatologist in Great Barrington, Ill. "The idea that chocolate and caffeine cause acne has never really panned out." Some studies have suggested that milk products might influence acne, because of the presence of hormones and bacteria in the milk. "But the data isn't that strong, and I don't want to recommend that 30-year-old women cut out milk when they need it for their bone health."

Acne Myth 3: Stress causes acne.

This myth may have some basis in reality, but it's hard to quantify. "Some studies have found that college students have increased breakouts during finals, but it's hard to be sure if it's causative," Derick says. Not all students with acne have increased breakouts during stressful times. "So maybe stress does play a role, but we haven't seen any good studies showing that stress hormones make acne worse."

Acne Myth 4: Don't wear sunscreen, it will aggravate your acne.

You just have to pick the right sunscreen. Chemical sunscreens, like Helioplex, dissipate UV light using a chemical reaction, which may cause heat bumps. If you're prone to acne, use a physical sunscreen like zinc oxide instead.

Acne Myth 5: You have acne because you're not washing enough.

Unless you're a slob, that's probably not true. "Studies in teens show that washing your face twice a day is more effective than just once, but more than that isn't necessary and can dry out your skin," Derick says. "Cleansers are only on your skin for five seconds. Leave-on products like retinoid creams are more efficacious."

Acne Myth 6: You can't wear makeup if you have a breakout.

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Some makeup can definitely exacerbate acne, particularly thicker liquid foundations that can clog pores and stage-type pancake makeup. "But lighter, looser powder foundations, like mineral powder, aren't nearly as aggravating to your skin," Derick says. "Of course, people who have acne want to cover it, and coverage is better with thicker liquids, but you have to compromise."

Acne Myth 7: Acne is just a cosmetic problem.

Acne can have lasting consequences in how you feel about yourself -- and left untreated, or improperly managed, it can leave permanent scars.

Acne Myth 8: You just have to wait and let acne go away with time.

There are many treatments now available for acne, and dermatologists can prescribe the right option for you.

Acne Myth 9: You can "clean up" a pimple by scrubbing at it.

That's actually the worst thing you can do. "People will spend hours trying to get goop out of skin to heal the acne," Derick says. "But picking your skin is the number one way of getting a scar. If you have a huge pimple and a big date tonight, you can get a single injection from your dermatologist that will reduce it. Don't pick!"

Acne Myth 10: If you're an adult, just go to the cosmetics counter and get a good face cream or cleanser.

"People will go to their department store and get advice from the person behind the counter who's selling products, but they won't pay a co-pay to an expert who could give a real prescription for acne," Derick says. "What dermatologists can do for acne is much more than these over-the-counter products. Especially if you have really problematic skin, our repertoire is much more diverse than just benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid."

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