



Acne – Face it Naturally

Written by Jill Grunewald and published in Present Magazine, January 2008

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Once thought to be a condition that only afflicted teenagers, acne can trouble us into our 20's, 30's, and 40's, as if we were fresh-faced high schoolers. Indeed, the stats are high; acne affects us all at some point in our lives. But the disorder continues to be misunderstood, even by the medical community.

What causes zits and blackheads? What treatments work most effectively? Am I going to break out if I eat this chocolate? Acne is an inflammation of the skin's sebaceous (oil-producing) glands, mainly on the face, chest, and back. There is a bacterial component to acne, but, contrary to popular belief, acne is not *caused* by bacteria.

Acne occurs when androgens and other hormones (the ones having a heyday when we're teenagers) create overactive oil glands and thus pore blockage, which in turn colonizes the naturally occurring, typically harmless bacteria. Our immune systems react to this clustering of bacteria, leading to the inflammation.

It's also true that stress and acne often go hand in hand and, unfortunately, the two can exacerbate one another. Acne can lead to stress, and stress produces the hormones that lead to acne, initiating a true vicious cycle. Therefore, I always recommend stress-reduction techniques such as yoga, cardiovascular exercise, or meditation, in addition to the recommendations below.

A "Western" Disease?

The allopathic medical community has had a difficult time making up its mind as to whether there is a link between diet and acne. For many years, doctors told pimply teenagers to stay away from pizza, chocolate, and soda, among other "junk foods," but then reneged on this theory and stated that, despite public opinion claiming the opposite, there was no association between what we put in our mouths and acne.

Regrettably, this flip-flopping and uncertainty about the root of the problem only caused more confusion for sufferers. Currently, many doctors, both Western and naturopathic, are in agreement that watching what we eat has a significant effect on the health of our skin. In fact, many are questioning whether acne is an isolated skin disorder or if it is an endocrine or immune imbalance or systemic inflammatory condition.

From my research on skin conditions of many types, I am convinced that all skin disorders originate in the gut. As I stated in my Gimme Some (Healthy) Skin article, our skin, the largest organ of our body, is linked to all our major bodily functions and what's inside will always come out.

Fortunately, I've witnessed severe psoriasis, eczema, and acne sufferers see truly dramatic results with alterations in the diet. There is substantiation of a higher incidence of acne in populations consuming a high-glycemic, inflammation-generating diet, one that is rich in processed carbohydrates, refined oils, dairy products, and low in omega-3 fatty acids.

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



According to Jesse Buikema, natural foods expert in Minneapolis, “New research suggests that diet, and more specifically a high-glycemic diet, is a major environmental factor in the onset and severity of acne.”

To be sure, the typical American meal contains disproportionate amounts of refined carbohydrates and other inflammation-producing foods such as sugars, hydrogenated oils, and processed meats. It is no wonder that Americans have the highest rates of acne, affecting 79-95% of us by recent estimates.

While there are a few topical prescription formulas that may help cosmetically, I always challenge people to get to the root of the problem. In severe cases, these drugs could be used in the short-term, at the same time allowing a low-glycemic, anti-inflammatory diet to take hold and start healing naturally. And hey, about that chocolate, there is no clear evidence that chocolate causes acne! As a matter of fact, the health benefits of a little dark chocolate now and then are worth celebrating.

Natural Topical Recommendations:

- Good ol’ soap and water. Use a mild glycerin soap.
- Tea tree oil: A natural anti-microbial, use a 5% solution to prevent irritation.
- Calendula: A natural alternative to benzoyl peroxide. The flowers can be made into tinctures, lotions, creams, and tea. The tea makes a great face wash.
- Aloe vera gel: Anti-inflammatory, good moisturizer for acne-prone skin.
- Jojoba oil: Prevents excess oil production and does not block pores. It can be used as carrier for the tea tree oil.

Dietary and Supplemental Recommendations:

- Low glycemic diet: Choose foods low in processed carbohydrates, dairy, and refined oils and high in fruits, vegetables, clean proteins, and complex carbohydrates.
- Elimination Provocation diet: To sleuth out food sensitivities.
- Omega-3 fatty acids: Obtain from eating fish or from supplementation. Reduces inflammation and moderates immune response to bacteria.
- Vitamin D: Anti-inflammatory, however high doses of supplemental vitamin D can be toxic, and yes, it’s true that a little sun exposure, our best source of vitamin D, treats mild acne cases (just don’t get burned!).
- B-complex vitamins: Balances hormones.
- Vitamin A: Best in the form of beta carotene. High doses of supplemental vitamin A can be toxic.
- Oregon Grape Root: Antibacterial and anti-inflammatory.