

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Acne: A Natural Approach

Pimples. Blemishes. Zits. Whatever you call them, the characteristic lesions of acne can range from annoying to painful and even psychologically crippling. Studies of teenagers and young adults with mild to moderate acne frequently report poor self-image, social impairment and diminished quality of life as a result of their skin condition (Dermatol Res Pract 2012;2012:571516).

While the prevalence and stigma of acne make its victims a hot market for pharmaceutical treatments, these drugs aren't always safe, cautions Dr. Gravesen. Read on to learn more about the causes of acne, the potential hazards of common acne medications, and a menu of safer, natural alternatives to clear your skin and ease your mind.

The Mechanics of Acne

Common acne — or acne vulgaris — comprises lesions on the skin that form around hair follicles. At the base of each hair on the body, specialized glands produce sebum, the “oil” that protects and lubricates our skin. When excess sebum combines with the protein keratin shed by dead skin cells, it can form a blockage at the follicle. The presence of the common bacterium *Propionibacterium acnes* in these blockages causes inflammation or even cysts.

The teenage years begin with a spike in the body's production of androgen hormones. Androgens trigger an increase in sebaceous gland size as well as sebum production. Hormonal changes brought on by stress can also up sebum production, leading to acne at any stage of life (*Clin Dermatol* 2004;22:360-6).

Risky Drug Therapies

Several medications are commonly prescribed to treat acne. One of these is isotretinoin, a synthetic derivative

of vitamin A. It is a known cause of birth defects, leading the pharmaceutical company that originally developed it to pull it from the market. Several studies also link isotretinoin to depression, inflammatory bowel disease and stunted bone development in children (*Am J Gastroenterol* 2010;105:1986-93, *Pediatr Blood Cancer* 2011;56:474-6).

Broad-spectrum antibiotics are another common course of treatment for acne. Dr. Gravesen cautions patients that these drugs are detrimental to the “good” bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, often triggering stomach upset and diarrhea. Furthermore, the bacte-

ria involved in acne may develop resistance to these antibiotics, rendering them useless (*Cutis* 2007;79 Suppl:9).

Women suffering from acne thought to be related to hormone imbalance may be advised to take oral contraceptives. These synthetic hormones interact with the body's natural chemistry to produce a range of possible side effects. Oral contraceptives increase the risk of deep vein blood clots that can dislodge and be carried to the lungs, causing pulmonary embolism. “The Pill” can also cause chronic headaches, depressive symptoms and decreased libido (*Thromb Res* 2012;129:e257-62).

Watch Out for Glycemic Load

Dr. Gravesen explains that foods with a high glycemic load — those



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that cause the blood sugar to spike rapidly, including refined grains and sugars — increase the body's levels of insulin and insulin-like growth-factor 1 (IGF-1), a hormone that stimulates growth. This in turn hastens the production of androgen, the hormone implicated in acne (*Clin Dermatol* 2010;28:598-604).

To manage acne safely, start with a look at what goes into your body. Researchers find that acne is practically nonexistent in populations that eat a diet with a low glycemic load (*Acta Derm Venereol* 2012; Epub).

Research Dairy Products

Dairy products are often singled out as dietary contributors to acne. Indeed, milk is designed by nature to promote the growth of baby mammals, so it's no surprise that it affects levels of the growth hormone IGF-1 in the body (*Clin Dermatol* 2010;28:598-604).

However, not all milk is created equal. One study shows that IGF-1 levels are much higher in milk from cows treated with the hormone rbST. Organic milk has even less IGF-1 than rbST-free conventional milk (*J Am Diet Assoc* 2008;108:1198-203).

IGF-1 levels increase when milk is treated with heat, according to a South Korean study. Finally, acne is more strongly associated with skim milk than whole milk consumption (*J Am Acad Dermatol* 2012; Epub). For clear skin and optimal health, the doctor recommends that patients who consume dairy choose milk that is as close as possible to its natural state.

Know Your Nutrients

Specific nutrients can improve skin health and fight acne. Vitamin A is well-known for its ability to heal and protect skin. Severe acne is seen in people deficient in this crucial antioxidant. Excellent sources of vitamin A include liver, carrots, sweet potatoes, butter and

kale.

Zinc also has powerful antioxidant qualities that protect the skin, temper inflammation and accelerate healing. Calf's liver, crimini and shiitake mushrooms, spinach and venison are some of the foods richest in zinc.

Omega-3 fatty acids, particularly EPA, show promise in countering acne. These essential fatty acids — found in oily fish like herring, mackerel and salmon as well as cod liver oil — reduce the skin's inflammatory response (*Prostaglandins Leukot Essent Fatty Acids* 2012; Epub).

Topical Treatments

Many gentle yet effective topical preparations for acne contain active ingredients derived from natural sources. Salicylic acid, a component found in willow tree bark, has been used medicinally since the time of Hippocrates. As an acne treatment, researchers find it comparably effective with benzoyl peroxide, a commonly recommended antibacterial that many find drying and irritating (*J Cosmet Dermatol* 2009;8:19-23).

Alpha-hydroxy acids, derived from plants or milk, are typically well-tolerated when used in acne preparations (*G Ital Dermatol Venereol* 2010;145:319-22).

Antimicrobial azelaic acid comes from wheat, rye and barley and is safe for pregnant and nursing mothers (*J Dtsch Dermatol Ges* 2010;8 Suppl 1:S24-30).

For a truly natural approach, clear skin can be as close as your kitchen. Coconut oil is not only a delicious and healthy cooking fat, but also a traditional cosmetic that moisturizes while counteracting P. acnes bacteria. The secret is lauric acid, a fatty acid in coconut oil with 15 times the antimicrobial power of benzoyl peroxide (*J Invest Dermatol* 2009;129:2480-8).

Finally, tea tree and neem are two essential oils with a proven track record against acne. A 5 percent solution of tea tree oil effectively reduces severity and number of acne lesions with minimal side effects. However, avoid using undiluted tea tree oil on the skin as it can cause irritation. Neem oil is revered in Ayurvedic medicine for soothing a variety of skin ailments, including acne. It reduces inflammation and has antibacterial and antioxidant properties (*Curr Med Chem Anticancer Agents* 2005;5:149-6).

Trust Us for Natural Solutions

In addition to chiropractic adjustments to alleviate musculoskeletal symptoms and support overall well-being, the doctor teaches patients how to manage a variety of health concerns — like acne — without relying on drugs. Optimal health comes when the body re-



ceives natural support to heal and protect itself. To learn more about how the chiropractic lifestyle can help you care for your body, call us today and schedule a consultation.

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