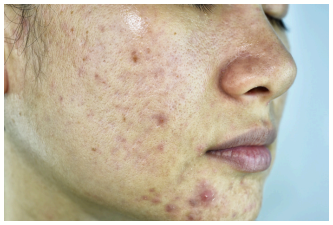
Acne

Patient information leaflet

Common Ailments Service

Only use this leaflet if your pharmacist has advised you about your or your child's condition.

Acne is a common skin condition that causes spots on the face, chest and back.



Glands in the skin produce an oily substance called sebum which is released into hair follicles in the skin. In acne, sebum and dead skin cells block the follicle, and spots form. Sometimes, bacteria that are normally harmless and live on the skin infect the blocked follicles. Then pus builds up as white blood cells enter the follicles to fight the bacteria.

There may be different types of spots, including:

- blackheads – small and either black or yellow in colour
- whiteheads – similar to blackheads, but do not empty when squeezed
- papules – small red bumps that may feel sore
- pustules – small red bumps filled with pus
- nodules – sometimes painful, hard lumps beneath the skin
- cysts – large pus-filled lumps

Although acne is most common in teenagers it can affect people of any age.

Treatment and Prevention

Medicines that can help

These medicines are not suitable for everyone. Make sure you have asked your pharmacist for advice about what treatment is best for you or your child.

Your pharmacist may recommend one of 3 combination gels:

- **benzoyl peroxide** and an antibiotic called **clindamycin**
- benzoyl peroxide and **adapalene**
- clindamycin and **tretinoin**

All these treatments are used to treat mild to moderate acne. If none of these are suitable for you, your pharmacist may suggest a gel that only contains benzoyl peroxide.

Benzoyl peroxide helps by reducing the number of bacteria (germs) on your skin, reducing inflammation (swelling) and unplugging blocked pores (openings of hair follicles).

Retinoids such as adapalene and tretinoin also help to unplug blocked pores and reduce inflammation.

Clindamycin is an antibiotic that kills bacteria and will help with inflammation.

The treatment that your pharmacist recommends will depend on your individual circumstances, for example the colour of your skin and whether you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Treatment and Prevention

Using gels for acne

When you first start using the gel, it may make your skin:

- itch
- burn
- peel
- look red

If the gel irritates your skin or you have sensitive skin, speak to your pharmacist. It may help to start by using the gel less often, for example every other day.

The gel may make your skin more sensitive to sunlight. Avoid too much sun exposure and apply oil-free sunscreen with SPF 30 or above. Gels containing benzoyl peroxide may also cause bleaching so try not to get them on your hair or clothes.

Apply the gel sparingly to the whole area that has acne, not just to the spots you can see.

Keep using the gel because it takes up to 8 weeks to have an effect. After about 3 months of treatment with the gel, make an appointment with your doctor to discuss whether you need to continue. They may discuss other treatments with you if your acne has not completely gone.

Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine.

If you are concerned about any side effects from a treatment, report it to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You can also report side effects on the Yellow Card app or website.

Skin care

Acne is not caused by poor hygiene or diet. You cannot pass acne on to other people.

To help improve your acne:

- avoid washing your face too much as this can irritate the skin and make it dry
- use a non-alkaline (pH neutral or slightly acidic) skin cleaning product on your skin twice daily
- use water-based moisturisers and cosmetics, not oil-based ones
- use a fragrance-free moisturiser if you have dry skin
- use a moisturiser regularly to keep your skin barrier intact and to reduce any skin irritation caused by your treatment
- shower soon after exercising, as sweat can irritate acne
- avoid picking or squeezing spots as this can cause scarring
- avoid using a lot of make-up or cosmetics and remove them at the end of the day
- wash your hair regularly, and keep it off your face

When to Get Help

Ask for a GP appointment or call 111 if:

- your acne is beginning to make you depressed
- your acne is getting worse
- your treatment has not started to work after 8 weeks
- you develop swollen or blistered skin (stop using the gel)

Ask for an urgent GP appointment or call 111 if:

- you develop clusters of large, hard or pus-filled lumps (nodules or abscesses)
- you start to feel very ill

If you are worried that your or your child's condition is not getting better, or is getting worse, talk to your GP.

More information

For more information on acne or a medicine, talk to your pharmacist or look at the following websites:

Acne Support (run by the British Association of Dermatologists): https://www.acnesupport.org.uk
NHS 111 Wales: https://111.wales.nhs.uk/acne/
Patient UK: https://patient.info/skin-conditions/acne-leaflet
Medicines A-Z: https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/

Information from the above resources is included in this leaflet.

Mae'r daflen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This leaflet is also available in Welsh.

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Welsh Medicines Advice Service