

## Problem Skin Primer

By Mark Lees, PhD, MS

Millions of people are afflicted by acne-prone skin. It affects all ages, all races and both genders. The tendency to develop acne and related blemishes is due to hereditary. People who suffer from acne-prone skin inherit two major factors: the tendency to retain cells—known medically as retention hyperkeratosis, and overactive sebaceous oil glands in the skin. As cells build up, they are coated by oil (sebum) secreted by the overactive glands. This causes a type of “sludge” that blocks pores (follicles), cutting off oxygen from the bottom of the follicle.

Acne bacteria (*propionibacterium acnes*) are anaerobic, which means they cannot survive in the presence of oxygen. Even though these bacteria exist normally in every pore on every person, acne does not manifest itself in most people because oxygen is penetrating the follicle, keeping bacterial growth in check. When a blockage occurs in the follicle, however, this oxygen cannot penetrate as easily and sets the stage for development of acne blemishes.

Acne bacteria feed off fatty acids that they process from the abundance of sebaceous oil secreted by the oil glands. This causes more inflammation,

resulting in swelling that further blocks the follicle.

## Hormones, Hormones, Hormones

The signal that triggers oil production is sent by hormones called androgens, male hormones, present in both men and women. Androgens are what cause acne problems to begin at puberty. They also cause women to sometimes develop acne problems and hair growth at menopause, particularly pesky premenstrual breakouts. These premenstrual flares are theorized to be caused by sudden surges of oil triggered by androgens in the bloodstream. These surges inflame the follicles, causing sudden acne flares—most often in the chin and jaw line areas.

In chronic cases, these flares can be managed with hormonal therapy from a gynecologist or an endocrinologist (hormone specialist physician).

## Picking at Acne

Some people chronically pick at their pimples, resulting in scrapes and sometimes scars. The medical term for this is *acne excorieé*. Hyperpigmentation (dark splotching) also can result from this, because of injuries to the dermis, which cause the skin to produce skin pigment as a defense mechanism. This is particularly true in darker skin types. People also try to treat the splotching, ignoring the acne, which is actually the cause.

Removing plugs—blackheads and whiteheads—is actually a good idea, but should be performed by a competent esthetician or other skin care professional who has been trained in the proper methods.

## Control Methods

Although there is still no real cure for acne, acne-prone skin can be managed by controlling cell buildup and managing the oil secreted by glands. Because this is a never-ending cycle, people with acne-prone skin must be forever vigilant in controlling the buildup that begins the development of blemishes. The beginning of this process in the follicle results in the formation of a *microcomedo*, a small “sludge” within the follicle that cannot be seen by the person. It is only in the later stages that this sludge results in a blackhead (*open comedo*), whitehead (*closed comedo*) or a pimple. The trick in managing acne-prone skin is the squelching of the development of the microcomedo.

## Ingredients that Help

Many drug ingredients help squelch acne, including prescription drugs such as tretinoin (Retin-A), Tazarotene (Tazorac) and others. These drugs essentially work by causing the inside of the follicle to slough dead cell buildup. Appearance side effects of these drugs include redness, excessive dryness and inflammation.

Over-the-counter drug ingredients work similarly, although generally less aggressively. They include benzoyl peroxide, salicylic acid and sulfur-resorcinol. Skin care products designed for acne-prone skin may also contain these agents.

Alpha hydroxy acids (AHA), including glycolic acid, have similar effects but are considerably more gentle and are not considered to be drugs. They are not as aggressive as the previously mentioned ingredients, but this may be helpful in controlling cell buildup in the follicles with much less irritation. They are particularly helpful for adult acne-prone skin. This type of skin does not suffer from widespread acne, but rather frequent individual blemishes and a tendency toward oiliness and clogged pores. Many products are now available with a combination of salicylic and glycolic acid. Most of these products are in liquid gel bases. They are to be used daily or twice daily, and if used with other sloughing agents, must be used carefully to avoid irritation. Dermatologists and skin care specialists should be careful about combining too many peeling agents, as this can cause inflammation and unwanted appearance effects, discouraging clients from continuing the program.

Effective rinse-off foaming cleansers also help control oiliness. These are usually liquid wash-type cleansers and contain ingredients such as ammonium lauryl sulfate, which help to remove excess oil.

### **Anti-Aging Conflicts**

As people age, they produce less oil. Why is this a problem for acne-prone skin? Unfortunately, many moisturizers utilizing some of the wonderful new anti-aging ingredients are designed with the less-oily skin in mind. They often contain oils and emollient ingredients that may be helpful to dry, maturing skin, but they often can add to the problems for oily, acne-prone, maturing skin.

Acne-prone and clogged pore-prone persons concerned about aging should look for anti-aging products in gel or lotion bases. Skin care professionals can be very helpful in guiding clients in product selection. Choose products that will provide the age-fighting benefits, but that are in lightweight bases that have been tested for comedogenicity (the tendency to clog) and acnegenicity (the tendency to inflame the inside of pores).

Don't forget that the best defense against aging is the daily use of a broad-spectrum SPF 15+ sunscreen. Look for one built into a moisturizer designed for acne-prone skin.

### **Making Up**

Unfortunately, when dealing with acne-prone skin, one product that contains inflaming or clogging emollients can often spoil the whole routine. Besides watching anything in a moisturizing base (including sunscreens, hydrators, and even AHA products), be very careful not to spoil a good skin care program with makeup that is oily or irritating. Foundations should be checked to make sure they are for problem-prone skin. "Oil-free" does not necessarily mean that the foundation is free of all emollients that can cause or aggravate flares. Blushes and powders can also be a problem. Check all makeup products to see if they have been tested for comedogenicity.

**"The trick to managing acne is squelching the development of microcomedo."**

However, there is no scientific evidence that any food causes breakout tendencies, except in the case of rosacea, which is not the type of acne being discussed here. Chocolate, erroneously blamed for years for acne flares, has actually been proven not to inflame acne. You are more likely to get a zit from *worrying* about eating chocolate than you are from eating it. Many women avoid dairy products, again from erroneous

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information. There is no evidence that milk or milk products cause or worsen acne.

### Professional Help

Regular facials can help acne-prone and oily skin, but only if they are performed by competent, well-trained estheticians. Not all facials are great for acne. Many anti-aging facial treatments may be loaded with oils or irritants that can aggravate a flare. Shop around and find an esthetician who is thoroughly trained in problem skin. Ask friends who you know have had acne problems. However, asking friends with perfect skin may not direct you to someone who is competently trained in problem skin management.

you are wearing on your skin and treating your skin with 24 hours a day is most important. **PMPR**

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It is also perfectly acceptable to have a consultation with an esthetician before starting a treatment program. The only thing you have to lose is the consultation fee. Ask about the esthetician’s training, and make sure you feel comfortable with the assessment of your particular skin problems.

One of the most important things a well-trained esthetician can do for you is help you choose the right products for your skin. What