

Health Matters – January 2010

Adolescents & Acne

Nearly all of us have been there: staring at the mirror in the bathroom with a red, seemingly fluorescent zit calling the entire world to stare. **Acne**. Even the word sounds ugly. Although acne is not physically disabling, its psychological impact can be tremendous. Well, my friends, there is hope. With some persistence, commitment and the right combination of therapies, clearer skin can be yours!

Our uninvited guest, acne, typically shows up as kids are heading into puberty. An increase in hormone production causes a sordid combination of the growth of oil glands and a rise in oil production. Throw in some bacteria and the wild cards of stress, diet, some “products” and local irritation, and the scourge of adolescence is born.

Today there are a wide variety of therapies on hand to treat acne. Pediatricians, family practitioners and dermatologists are available. Because acne usually hangs around for years, finding a reasonable maintenance regimen is essential. Being a teenager is tough enough; but if you have to spend several hours a day with washes, lotions, pills and swabs it is a bit overwhelming.

Years ago some patients were given very rough sponges and strong soaps years ago. Today we know that washing gently no more than twice daily with a soft cloth or clean hands is all that is needed. A soap or cleanser with a pH of 5 to 7 tends to be less irritating and drying. After letting skin dry for 20-30 minutes, apply acne medication to all of the affected areas. Over-the-counter medications, such as Clearasil, Oxy-10 and others, are a good place to start. Because it takes about eight weeks for a pimple to mature, any therapy must be continued beyond this duration to tell if it is working. Unfortunately, acne can get a bit worse during this early use. Dryness is a common side effect, but using a bit less or some non-comedogenic (“non-zit forming”) lotion can help.

For those whose acne doesn’t respond well to these early steps, there are many other weapons. Prescription strength creams like Differin, Retin-A, Tazorac, Benzaclin and Duac all work very well. While one may work better for you, another may be the ticket for your sister. When these are combined with either a topical or oral antibiotic, even better results can be seen. Lastly, there is an oral medication (one brand name is Accutane) that is an option for those who are most severely affected. This is a very effective medication, curing nearly half of patients while improving most. This medication requires monthly visits and enrollment in a national safety program. Your doctor can help choose the right course of treatment for you. Of course, there are other ways to treat acne – some proven, some not so much.

In the end, acne doesn’t have to be the scourge of adolescence. Teens (of all ages) can benefit from a well thought out plan to help keep their skin clear.



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