



Acne in Adult Women

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Source

The Canadian Dermatology Association provides patient education on acne, including causes, triggers, adult acne, psychological effects, cosmetics, treatment options, and product recognition guidance (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

What is Adult Acne?

Acne happens when pores become clogged by dead skin cells and sebum, a greasy material produced by oil glands. Bacteria within the pores, called *Cutibacterium acnes*, can also contribute to pore blockage and inflammation, which may appear as redness, swelling, pus, blackheads, whiteheads, pimples, nodules, or cysts (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Acne often begins around puberty, but it may continue into adulthood in a milder or more severe form. Acne can also begin for the first time in adulthood. According to the Canadian Dermatology Association, three-quarters of adult acne occurs in women, and women make up 75% of adult acne cases (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Why Adult Acne Often Affects Women

Hormone fluctuations are often involved in adult acne. Some women experience cyclical acne, meaning acne flares in connection with the menstrual cycle, often before a period.

Acne may also flare during pregnancy or menopause because of hormonal changes (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Adult acne can vary in severity. Some people may have blackheads, whiteheads, or small pimples, while others may have deeper, more painful nodules or cysts. Acne that is deeper, long-lasting, or picked at has a higher risk of scarring (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Psychological Impact

Acne is very common, but it can still have a significant psychological impact. It may cause embarrassment, low self-esteem, and reduced confidence. It can interfere with daily activities and may affect a person's willingness to go out with friends, speak in public, swim, or participate in social activities (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

When the emotional impact is severe, acne can contribute to depression or thoughts of self-harm. Reassurance, counselling, and early treatment are important because acne can affect both skin health and mental well-being (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Cosmetics and Acne

Makeup and hair care products can clog pores and trigger or worsen acne in some people. The Canadian Dermatology Association recommends looking for acne-friendly terms on product labels, such as “oil-free,” “non-comedogenic,” or “non-acnegenic” (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

The Canadian Dermatology Association's Skin Health Program recognizes skincare products that meet specific criteria, including being gentle on skin, fragrance-free, and non-pore clogging. People shopping for skincare products can look for the Canadian Dermatology Association recognized product logo on labels (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Products recognized by the Canadian Dermatology Association's Skin Health Program are assessed by a scientific expert panel of certified dermatologists. The program is designed to help Canadians identify skincare products that support healthy skin, hair, and nails (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-b).

Acne-Friendly Skin Care Tips

For acne-prone skin, the Canadian Dermatology Association recommends washing the face once or twice daily with a gentle cleanser. Overwashing, scrubbing, exfoliating too aggressively, or using strong cleansers or alcohol-based toners can irritate the skin and may worsen acne (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Acne-friendly habits may include:

- Use gentle, non-irritating skincare products
- Choose makeup and sunscreen labelled “oil-free,” “non-comedogenic,” or “non-acnegenic”
- Remove makeup before sleeping
- Wash makeup brushes with soap
- Launder pillowcases and sheets often
- Avoid picking or squeezing acne spots
- Use sunscreen, especially when using acne treatments that can increase sun sensitivity
- Avoid products that personally seem to trigger breakouts

(Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a)

Treatment Options

A doctor or certified dermatologist can help treat acne at any stage. Even mild acne can lead to scarring, and it is not always possible to predict whether mild acne will become more severe (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

For mild acne, non-prescription treatments may be tried first. Over-the-counter acne products often include medicated cleansers, creams, or gels. Common active ingredients include salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide. The Canadian Dermatology Association notes that acne treatments need to be used consistently for a couple of months before seeing a difference (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

A healthcare provider may recommend prescription treatments for more persistent or moderate to severe acne. Prescription treatments can include topical antibiotics, topical retinoids, benzoyl peroxide combinations, anti-inflammatory treatments, oral antibiotics, oral retinoids, or hormonal agents such as birth control pills or spironolactone. Hormonal treatments may be useful for acne that flares before menstruation or acne that occurs along the jawline (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

When to Seek Medical Help

You should consider seeing a doctor or certified dermatologist if acne is painful, persistent, causing distress, leaving marks or scars, or not improving after six to eight weeks of treatment. Early treatment can help reduce the risk of scarring and emotional effects (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-a).

Resources

Canadian Dermatology Association Acne Information

The Canadian Dermatology Association provides patient information on acne causes, triggers, severity, treatment, scarring, and skin care recommendations (Canadian Dermatology

Association, n.d.-a).

Canadian Dermatology Association Product Recognition Programs

The Canadian Dermatology Association's product recognition programs help identify skincare products that meet dermatologist-reviewed criteria, including products that may be suitable for acne-prone or sensitive skin (Canadian Dermatology Association, n.d.-b).

References

Canadian Dermatology Association. (n.d.-a). *Acne*. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://dermatology.ca/public-patients/diseases-conditions/skin-conditions/acne/>

Canadian Dermatology Association. (n.d.-b). *Product recognition programs*. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://dermatology.ca/recognized-products/product-recognition-programs/>