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Acne Myths

Lots of kids and teens have to cope with acne. It's a common part of puberty, but adults and preteens get it too. Because it's so common, acne is the subject of much discussion — and many myths. By clearing up some of the common tales about acne, you can help your son or daughter get through it!

Myth: Getting a Tan Helps Clear Up Skin.

Things That May Aggravate Acne:

- ▶ irritants such as pollution, hair products, and makeup that's not labeled noncomedogenic or nonacnegenic
- ▶ pressure from hats and headbands
- ▶ friction caused by touching or rubbing the face
- ▶ changing hormone levels
- ▶ overzealous scrubbing
- ▶ popping pimples
- ▶ sun exposure

Fact: Even though a tan may temporarily cover the redness of acne, there's no evidence that having tanned skin helps to clear up acne. People who tan in the sun or in tanning booths or beds run the risk of developing dry, irritated, or even burned skin. They're also at increased risk of premature aging and developing skin cancer.

Encourage kids to keep skin safe by wearing protective clothing, hats, and sunglasses when outdoors. They should also wear a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (or SPF) of at least 30 that's labeled "noncomedogenic" or "nonacnegenic," which means the product won't clog pores. Discourage the use of tanning beds or booths, even for special occasions such as proms or vacations. Ask your doctor whether a sunless tanning product would be a better alternative.

It's especially important for kids who use prescription acne medications (including oral contraceptives, which are often prescribed to help clear up acne) to stay out of the sun and away from tanning beds. These drugs can make skin extremely sensitive to sunlight and the rays from ultraviolet tanning booths.

Myth: Washing Your Face Often Prevents Breakouts.

Fact: Hygiene isn't related to the development of acne, either. Washing the face each day gets rid of dead skin cells, excess oil, and surface dirt, but too much cleansing or washing too vigorously can lead to dryness and irritation — which can actually make acne worse.

Dermatologists usually recommend gently washing — not scrubbing or rubbing — the face no more than twice a day with a mild cleanser and patting the skin dry. Kids should steer clear of harsh exfoliants or scrubs, which can actually irritate blemishes. In addition, toners containing high concentrations of alcohol can dry out the skin and should be avoided.

Myth: Popping Pimples Makes Them Go Away Faster.

Fact: Though popping a pimple may make it seem less noticeable temporarily, popping can cause the zit to stay around longer. Popping a pimple pushes bacteria from the zit further into the skin, making the area around the acne even more reddened and inflamed. Pimple-popping devices — such as "blackhead extractors" advertised in magazines — aren't any safer. Sometimes, popping a pimple will cause a brown or red mark to form that could last months. Scars, in the form of dents and pits, can last forever.

If your child is bummed because a huge zit arrived just in time for a special event, apply a dab of benzoyl peroxide gel to dry it. A dermatologist may also be able to recommend treatments for a teen with severe scarring.

Myth: For Clear Skin, Don't Wear Makeup or Shave.

Fact: Kids don't have to forego cosmetics as long as the products used are labeled noncomedogenic or nonacnegenic, which means they won't cause breakouts. Some concealers now contain benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid, which help to fight acne. Tinted acne-fighting creams may also help to fight pimples while hiding them.

However, if any product seems to be irritating the skin or causing breakouts, have your child stop using the product and call your dermatologist.

Cosmetics labeled "organic," "all natural," or those containing herbs have gained popularity, but they may contribute to clogged pores and acne, so it's best for kids who are prone to breakouts to steer clear of them.

Teen boys who have acne and shave can use either safety or electric razors, but should shave lightly around blemishes to avoid nicking the skin and causing irritation and infection.

Myth: Use More Acne Medication to Prevent Breakouts.

Fact: When it comes to over-the-counter acne medication containing active ingredients such as benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid, more isn't better. Using too much medication can actually worsen acne because it leads to dryness, irritation, and more blemishes.

But kids can get help for acne. A dermatologist can suggest acne treatments if your child:

- has tried over-the-counter acne treatments with little or no success
- has developed acne scars
- has painful, large pimples
- is dark-skinned and has acne that's causing dark patches to form
- has low self-esteem or a reduced enjoyment of life because of acne

Prescription acne medication may take up to 8 weeks to have a noticeable effect, so remind kids to use the medication exactly as directed. If the acne doesn't improve within 6 to 8 weeks, talk to the dermatologist.

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