



Medicine can mangle acne

by M.J. Wilson
Pimples.

If you can read that word without a quick pang of revulsion and embarrassment, you are among the fortunate few who have never suffered the excruciating torments of acne.

Eighty-five per cent of the adolescent population has, at one time or another, stared miserably at a mirror reflecting a face spotted, as the lotion ads say, with "unsightly blemishes." Acne could hardly come at a worse time—a period when young people already are burdened by physical and psychological growing pains and are deeply sensitive about the faces they are turning to the world.

Like such other familiar maladies as the common cold and chicken pox, there is no way yet to prevent the onset of acne. But, happily, modern medicine is coming up with some effective methods of treatment and, in the process, exploding myths about acne's cause.

Growth is basically what brings on acne. The pustules form with puberty when male hormone production increases in both boys and girls.

The hormones stimulate growth of body hair and oil glands of the skin. When excessive oil becomes compacted in a pore, a blackhead forms (it's dried oil, not dirt). When the oil backs up and ruptures the oil-duct walls, that's a pimple. Infection often spreads in a red splotch around the blocked duct.

Recently, doctors have found that birth-control pills, which slow the secretion of male hormones, are effective in halting acne among young girls. Broad-spectrum antibiotics, such as tetracycline, also are proving useful in preventing pustule infection.

Doctors wish that more teen-agers would avail themselves of medical advice rather than suffer in ignorance and risk scars on their psyches as well as on their faces. As Malvina M. Kremer, psychiatrist in charge of the adolescent clinic at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City, observes:

"The eruption of facial blemishes strikes at one of the most vulnerable aspects of the adolescent's sense of security and competence: social acceptability and desirability."

Furthermore, according to Kremer, "the popular mythology which attributes acne to 'bad' thoughts and practices, especially masturbation, is still surprisingly widespread," fostering deep anxiety and guilt feelings.

Another myth punctured by medicine, but still perpetuated by some doctors, is that favorite teen-age sweets and snacks are a leading cause of acne or play a major role in aggravating it.

"There is absolutely no evidence that dietary changes influence acne," says Dr. Albert M. Kligman, a University of Pennsylvania dermatologist. "It is dastardly to deprive adolescents of chocolate, soda pop, nuts, sea foods and so forth; doctors interdict foods as a punishment!"

The medical profession also hasn't much use for the some \$40 million worth of patent acne lotions and creams sold each year. Although many "are of some benefit," a pamphlet of the American Medical Association (AMA) states, "most of them will produce dryness if they are used excessively."

The best thing to do for acne, according to the AMA, is to wash the face gently twice a day with soap and hot water and shampoo hair regularly to remove oils.

Under a doctor's care, female hormones can be administered to girls. Antibiotics, application of Vitamin A, ultra-violet or x-ray therapy and lancing of inflamed pustules may be prescribed. The AMA warns that squeezing pimples and blackheads can damage tissues and increase the chance of scarring and infection.

What still puzzles researchers is why some people get acne and others escape it, and what triggers the chemical changes in the body that eventually cause the disorder to subside. Answers to these questions might enable doctors to check acne before it starts.

"There is something peculiar about the acne patient," says Kligman. "There is no acne without oiliness but not all people with oily skin develop acne. Acne is not infectious. If lesions are present, they should be treated, but acne cannot be circumvented."

Nor can doctors explain why pimples always seem to blossom just before a teen-ager's big date. ("Severe emotional stress may exacerbate acne," acknowledges Kligman.) When that happens, the AMA's rather Pollyannish advice may restore morale:

"Above all, you must believe that a pleasant personality, a well-groomed look and a smile are more important than a clear skin in making you attractive."

Better still, stay away from mirrors.
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