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Zapping Zits

What you can do about your teenager's acne

by Dr Lynn Chiam

FOR TODAY'S TEENAGERS,

appearance and personal image are very important. How they feel about their appearance affects how they feel about themselves – so acne becomes one of those factors that could be preventing them from fulfilling their potential.

Remember the old adage about “a stitch in time saving nine”? It is quite apt for acne. If your teen's moderate to severe acne goes untreated, it may leave permanent scars. This can be prevented if they receive treatment at an early stage.

What is acne?

The root causes of acne in teens are changes associated with hormonal stimulation in pilosebaceous units, which are skin structures consisting of a hair follicle and its associated sebaceous gland. When the follicles become clogged with plugs of sebum and sloughed-off cells, acne results.

The most common form of acne is *acne vulgaris*, sometimes called cystic acne or simply acne. It can present in different forms – blackheads, whiteheads, papules, pustules and nodules. In some cases, the different types can occur at the same time. Pustules and nodules can leave deep pitted scars.

Whiteheads and Blackheads

Despite their name, whiteheads (also known as closed comedones) don't always look white. In fact they usually appear as small, flesh-coloured bumps on the skin. They are follicles which are clogged with plugs of sebum and sloughed-off cells. Unlike papules and pustules (zits), comedones do not have surrounding inflammation or infection.

Blackheads (open comedones) are the same as whiteheads, except that the affected follicle has a larger opening which allows oxygen to reach the plug causing oxidation of pigment cells (melanin) and turning it black.