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Patient Information Leaflet: Acne

What is Acne?

Acne is a common skin condition that occurs when hair follicles become clogged with oil, dead skin cells, and bacteria. It primarily affects adolescents and young adults but can occur at any age. Acne manifests as blackheads, whiteheads, papules, pustules, nodules and cysts, typically appearing on the face, chest, back, and shoulders.

Causes of Acne:

Acne develops due to several interrelated factors, including:

- **Hormonal Changes:** Increases in androgens during puberty can lead to enlarged sebaceous (oil) glands and increased oil production.
- **Excessive Oil Production:** Overactive sebaceous glands can produce too much oil, which contributes to clogged pores.
- **Dead Skin Cells:** When these cells accumulate, they can block hair follicles and contribute to acne formation.
- **Bacteria:** *P. acnes*, a type of bacteria normally found on the skin, can multiply in clogged pores, leading to inflammation and pus.
- **Diet and Lifestyle:** Factors such as diet (high in sugar and dairy) or stress may aggravate acne in some individuals.

Symptoms:

Symptoms of acne can vary in severity and include:

- **Whiteheads:** Closed clogged pores.
- **Blackheads:** Open clogged pores with darkened surface.
- **Papules:** Small red, inflamed bumps.
- **Pustules:** Red bumps with pus at the top.
- **Cysts:** Large, painful, fluid-filled lumps beneath the skin.

Diagnosis:

Acne is usually diagnosed based on a physical examination of the skin. A healthcare provider may ask about your medical history, skincare routine, and any factors that might trigger or worsen your acne. In rare cases, further testing may be needed to rule out hormonal imbalances or other underlying conditions.

Management and Treatment Options: Managing acne generally involves a combination of lifestyle modifications and medical treatments based on severity:

1. Over-the-Counter Treatments:

- **Benzoyl Peroxide:** Helps kill bacteria, reduce inflammation, and unclog pores.
- **Salicylic Acid:** Aids in exfoliating dead skin cells and unclogging pores.
- **Alpha Hydroxy Acids (AHAs):** Promote skin exfoliation and improve the appearance of skin.

2. Prescription Treatments:

- **Topical Antibiotics:** Help reduce bacteria and inflammation. Examples include clindamycin and erythromycin.
- **Topical Retinoids:** Prescription-strength retinoids like tretinoin, adapalene, or tazarotene can be more effective at unclogging pores.

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- **Oral Antibiotics:** Such as doxycycline or lymecycline are used for moderate to severe acne to reduce inflammation and bacteria.
 - **Hormonal Treatments:** For some individuals, hormonal treatments like oral contraceptives containing drospirenone or cyproterone acetate can help regulate hormones and reduce acne in women.
3. **Advanced Treatments:**
- **Isotretinoin:** A potent oral retinoid for severe cases of acne resistant to other treatments. It requires close monitoring due to potential side effects.
4. **Post Acne Treatments:**
- **Chemical Peels:** Procedures that use acids to exfoliate the skin, reduce oil, and improve acne marks.
 - **Dermabrasion:** A technique where a dermatologist uses a specialist instrument to “sand” the skin and remove the top layers and make it smoother.
 - **Laser Therapy:** Certain types of lasers can help reduce acne scarring by resurfacing the skin or inducing collagen production.
 - **Microneedling:** Clinic based devices can be used to create micro-injuries and stimulate collagen production and help improve superficial scarring.

Self-Care and Lifestyle Tips:

- **Gentle Cleansing:** Wash your face twice a day with a mild cleanser to remove dirt and excess oil.
- **Moisturise:** Use non-comedogenic moisturisers to keep skin hydrated without clogging pores.
- **Avoid Touching or Picking:** Refrain from touching your face or picking at acne lesions to minimise irritation and scarring.
- **Healthy Diet:** Aim for a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Conclusion:

Acne is a condition with multiple factors that contribute to a variety of different skin lesions. It can be managed with good skin care, topical and oral treatments. Acne can cause marks that can be long lasting or permanent. There are a number of potential treatments to improve acne scars that can be considered after the completion of a course of treatment for the active condition.

