

Acne

How it's caused and how to cure it

Paul van Riel



Overcoming Common Problems

ACNE

Paul van Riel



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Introduction

This book is intended for all acne sufferers. Surprisingly, it is one of the first in the country to deal with the subject, and yet this skin condition is as old as mankind, and each successive generation has been plagued by it, notably in adolescence.

Books have been written and radio and television documentaries made about all sorts of illnesses, but seldom about acne. Acne is dismissed as some harmless adolescent problem. The stock response to anyone complaining about their marred face is: 'Don't get upset about it; it'll pass.' However, most people under twenty do not find it easy to keep things in proportion, and those plagued by acne find it particularly difficult.

Luckily, people are now starting to admit that acne can be a real problem. Women's magazines include regular features on it. Acne can be a social handicap, both personally and in the wider sense when, for example, one is interviewed for a job.

People are gradually accepting that acne is not caused by the way you live. But the same judgements are still made: 'you're careless about personal hygiene', 'you're a nervous type', and so on. As a result of this attitude many acne sufferers are ashamed of their skin, and do not even dare go to a doctor about it. Furthermore, acne is not generally regarded as a problem and those who feel otherwise are considered fusspots. Consequently, many people spend ages trying to treat acne with cosmetic preparations, even after these have proved to offer little, if any, relief.

Almost everyone is ill-informed about acne. 'Has acne

anything to do with sex?' 'Does eating things like chocolate make acne worse?' 'Should you squeeze black-heads?' 'Is it normal to have a kind of inferiority complex if you have acne?' 'Is acne hereditary?' These are just some of the many questions which cannot easily be answered. Why not?

On the whole there is little information available about acne, and such information as can be gleaned from magazines and so forth is often vague and incomplete. Friends and relations often offer well-meaning advice but who is to say whether their advice is right? In the end, the acne sufferer does not know what to believe. Furthermore, the information available is often contradictory. No wonder so few people know anything about the subject.

Even today, medical knowledge about acne is limited. It was not until after the Second World War that any thorough research was carried out, so it is hardly surprising that there are so few conspicuous results to date. No one yet knows, for instance, exactly how acne comes into being. Nor has any effective way of healing it been found.

However, some details at least are certain. It is important to know these because they indicate the most effective ways of treating acne. Hence this book, which brings together all the information that may be useful.

I am thirty-four and I suffer from acne too. Some years ago, at my wits' end, I went off to search for a book on acne in order to find out more about it. There weren't any, so in the end I decided to write one myself.

Acne does not presume to cure anyone of acne, but it does give various tips on how to keep acne down as much as possible, as well as describing the kinds of treatment problems the acne sufferer may face and advising how to keep them at bay.

PAUL VAN RIEL

Part I
The Facts about Acne

Acne and the Medical World

It is amazing that we still know so little about acne after thousands of years, even though medical knowledge has come a long way since 350 BC when an anonymous expert advised:

Watch a falling star, then instantly while the star is still shooting from the sky, wipe the pimples with a cloth or anything that comes to hand. Just as the star falls from the sky, so the pimples will fall from your body, only you must be very careful not to wipe them with your bare hand or the pimples will be transferred to it.¹

How important or unimportant is acne?

Why has the world of medicine treated acne so derisively for so long?

The main reasons are probably:

- 1 Acne usually passes within a couple of years.
- 2 Acne does not harm the body.

So from a purely medical viewpoint, acne is not a serious complaint. On the other hand, it can cause considerable havoc psychologically. Now that the medical world has accepted that diseases may have psychological origins and also that they can affect one's mental health, acne has at last been given the attention it deserves. Even so, there are hundreds of thousands of acne sufferers at any one time, and there are no signs of their numbers decreasing. That is why every effort must be made to find out more about acne, so that more can be done to fight it.

Acne Vulgaris

Pimples: the word itself is bad enough

There are many words to describe the adolescent's greatest plague: pimples, acne, spots, blackheads, lumps are just some of them. In order to prevent confusion, we will confine ourselves as far as possible in this book to the medical term, acne.

The word acne

Acne is a corruption of the Greek *acme*, meaning point. The ancient Greeks themselves, such as Aristotle and Hippocrates, called acne *ionthos* which means 'the first growth of beard' — a reference to the phase at which acne usually first appears in men.

Acne vulgaris

Acne vulgaris is actually the official medical term, and it simply means 'common' acne. There are, in fact, other more unusual kinds of acne which should be treated by a doctor. Here is a short description of the best known:

Acne conglobata et cystica. An acute acne with large, painful nodules on the face and back. With this kind of acne it is important to undergo a complete course of medical treatment; although this will not prevent permanent scarring, it will greatly reduce it.

Excoriated acne. An acne that looks worse than it actually is. It is caused when people cannot stop picking or fiddling with their spots. A nervous factor may be involved and then medical help may be useful.

Acne medicamentosa. Caused by the medical use of iodine, bromide, tar and camphor and by certain drugs like the corticosteroids.

Acne cosmetica. Caused when certain cosmetics are used by those with very sensitive skins. White grains (closed comedones) are visible when the skin is stretched, and the skin may look dull.

Occupational acne. This kind results from occupational exposure to oils, tar or chlorinated products. When clothes have absorbed too much of these products, or when the air in a factory contains too much chloric acid, the skin may become prone to acne.

In this book, 'acne' will always refer to *acne vulgaris*.

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How Long Does Acne Last?

When does acne start?

Acne usually starts at the onset of puberty. In girls, this may be almost a year before true puberty starts and at this stage, acne is so slight that it often passes unnoticed. There are those who remain free of it in later puberty as well. Even so, it is more common to have a mild form of acne during puberty than none at all. Hardly anyone gets through puberty without a single spot.

Acne also occurs sporadically in young children; this kind usually disappears of its own accord. If a child suffers from some kind of hormonal imbalance, then the acne may become widespread.

Some people do not get acne till their thirties, or even their forties. Contrary to general belief, peoples of all

nationalities and races get acne. There is evidence that it is less prevalent in some parts of the world (such as Japan), but the reasons for this (climate? heredity?) are not known for sure. Acne also seems to be less prevalent in agricultural than in industrial areas.

When does acne stop?

Most of us have a mild form of acne during puberty. A few have a very conspicuous form of acne vulgaris.

In most cases, acne passes quite naturally within a couple of years. We still lack any satisfactory explanation for this more or less spontaneous healing.

Roughly one person in six still has acne in their twenties. It lasts longer with some people than with others. Acne usually quietens down as the years pass, which is something of a comfort; acne hardly ever occurs after forty. Very occasionally, acne remains for a long time as a consequence of an endocrinal imbalance (endocrine glands are hormone-producing).

There are strong grounds for believing that the persistence and duration of acne is influenced by heredity. If someone has acne for a long time, there is a fair chance that others in the family have it for a similar period of time.

A growing group of adults

There are indications that acne lasts longer nowadays, particularly in women. This may be due to the use of certain cosmetics over a long period or to contraceptive pills which contain a lot of androgen hormones. Other causes may be a change in eating habits or a prolonged course in antibiotics (even if this was originally intended to combat acne).

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the days are past when acne was considered a typical adolescent condition. The cases where both parent and child are suffering from acne at the same time, still rare at the moment, may become less so.

Recent research in Britain among 2,155 men and women of eighteen and older showed that the following percentages were suffering from such conspicuous acne that they were referred to a skin specialist for treatment.²

Age	% of males	% of females
18	35	23
19	22.5	17
20	30	18
21	20	15
22	16	20
23	16	14
24	11	9
27	7.5	11.5
30	3.5	13
35	2.5	10
40	2	7
45	2.5	5.5
50	3	5

(These percentages are somewhat on the low side because about 1 per cent of the original test group (22 of the 2,155) could not be counted as they were already being treated for acne by a dermatologist.)

The difference between men and women

Girls generally become adult earlier, and consequently they get acne sooner than boys. This also means that they are usually free from it earlier.

During puberty, girls have acne slightly less often than boys, and usually less severely. Acne is usually at its worst in girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. In boys, the worst period is often between sixteen and

nineteen. In the West, children are becoming adults earlier and earlier and this means that the peak age for acne is also dropping.

Women get acne mainly on their faces and necks. In men, it frequently spreads to the shoulders and the top of the chest and back.

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The Skin

In order to understand acne, one should first know something about the skin. All physical contact between individuals takes place via the skin. Physical attraction has to some extent to do with the skin. We seldom think of it as an organ, and yet it is one, the largest of the body. The skin of an average adult is about two square metres in area and weighs nearly three kilograms. It is also the only organ that can be seen in its entirety. Skin varies in thickness, depending on where it is on the body: the skin covering the eyelids is half a millimetre thick whereas it is ten millimetres thick on the back. Hair and nails are extensions of the skin. Sweat glands, sebaceous glands and hair follicles (sacs) are all parts of the skin.

Functions of the skin

The skin is the body's wrapping and, as such, it has the important role of protecting the more sensitive parts. Other functions include:

- 1 Helping to prevent the body from drying out.

- 2 Removing waste and preventing useful substances from leaving the body.
- 3 Shielding us from external threats such as burning, sunlight, wounding and harmful substances such as bacteria.
- 4 Functioning as an early warning system for the nervous system. The skin contains highly-tuned sensors that register pain, pressure, cold, heat and itching.
- 5 Helping to regulate body temperature: blood vessels in the skin contract when it is cold and when it is hot they dilate, and sweat is released. These processes warm up and cool down the body respectively.

An average square centimetre of skin contains 200 nerve ends to register pain, twenty-five pressure sensors, plus twelve for heat and two for cold. The same square centimetre also contains fifteen sebaceous glands, 100 sweat glands, ten hairs, a metre of blood vessels and four metres of nerves.

Structure of the skin

Basically, the skin consists of three layers. The top outside layer is the *epidermis*, the layer below is the *dermis*. Under the dermis is a fatty layer. One of its purposes is to act as a kind of buffer.

The epidermis is visible and is itself made up of several layers. The horny outer layer is made up of dead cells that are constantly being rubbed off and replaced by new ones. The surface is kept supple, strong and waterproof by the secretions from the sweat and sebaceous glands.

The thicker dermis (dermis and epidermis are together about five millimetres thick) contains blood vessels, nerve endings, sweat and sebaceous glands and hair follicles.

These are held in a supportive, connective tissue called *collagen*.

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What Causes Acne?

Hormones

The body goes through all sorts of changes during puberty. Some of these are clearly visible: hairs appear under the armpits and around the genitals; girls develop breasts; boys grow facial hair on the chin and throat; and so on.

Many of these changes are caused by hormones. These are substances made by the body in order to regulate certain physical processes. It is assumed that androgen hormones (these are the hormones that determine male sexual characteristics; women have some too) play a role in the onset of acne. During puberty, when more androgen hormones are produced, the sebaceous glands start manufacturing more sebum (an oily substance). Nevertheless, adolescents with acne do not produce any more androgen than those who do not suffer from it. It follows that acne cannot be caused by the body making too much androgen. There is substantial evidence that the degree to which the receptor cells in the sebaceous glands are sensitive to the androgen hormones plays a role. This degree of sensitivity is determined by heredity.

Other causes

External causes may play a role alongside the above-