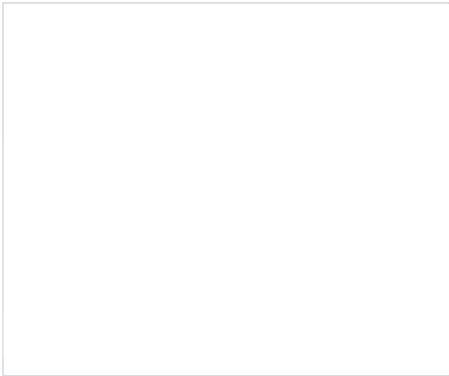


Best Acne Treatments and Creams

Need help with your acne? We surveyed pharmacists to collect their expert rankings of the best acne treatment brands. Differin was their No.1 pick. Check out our [Best Acne Face Washes](#) and the entire lineup of [Best OTC Best Medicines and Health Products](#) for more.



By [Toral Vaidya, M.D., Master of Public Health](#) | March 29 |




Rankings: Acne Treatments and Creams

RANK	BRAND	ACTIVE/KEY INGREDIENTS (sample product)	SAMPLE PRODUCT
#1 Score: 100 ⓘ	Differin	Adapalene	<div>Buy on CVS.com</div>
#2 Score: 60 ⓘ	Neutrogena	Benzoyl Peroxide (10%)	<div>Buy on CVS.com</div>
#3 Score: 56 ⓘ	Clearasil	Salicylic Acid (2%)	<div>Buy on Amazon</div>

RANK	BRAND	ACTIVE/KEY INGREDIENTS (sample product)	SAMPLE PRODUCT
#4 Score: 56 ⓘ	CeraVe	Salicylic Acid (2%)	<a href="#">Buy on Amazon</a>
#5 Score: 44 ⓘ	PanOxyl	Hydrocolloid	<a href="#">Buy on CVS.com</a>
#6 Score: 18 ⓘ	Clean & Clear	Benzoyl Peroxide (10%)	<a href="#">Buy on CVS.com</a>
#7 Score: 14 ⓘ	La Roche-Posay	Benzoyl Peroxide (5.5%)	<a href="#">Buy on CVS.com</a>
#8 Score: 3 ⓘ	Hero Cosmetics	Hydrocolloid	<a href="#">Buy on CVS.com</a>
#9 Score: 3 ⓘ	AcneFree	Benzoyl Peroxide (10%)	<a href="#">Buy on Amazon</a>
<a href="#">Collapse List</a>			

Please consult your health care provider for specific guidance on health products that may be appropriate for you. While U.S. News lists the results of the survey, U.S. News does not recommend or endorse any health products listed here. [Please see Disclaimer and a Note About Your Health](#). Read about the survey [here](#).

When you use our links to buy products, we may earn a commission. This does not affect the quality or independence of our editorial content.

**Why Trust U.S. News**  
How we rate OTC Medicines and Health Products

900+ brands evaluated

354 pharmacists surveyed

122 dermatologists surveyed

[See our full methodology](#)

When it comes to over-the-counter acne skin care products, there is an overwhelming number of products to choose from. From salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide to sulfur and retinoids, many evidence-based treatments can effectively target and prevent acne. We'll break down the science behind these key acne-fighting ingredients and provide tips to achieve clearer skin without medication.

## What Is Acne?

Acne is one of the most common skin conditions I diagnose and treat as a dermatologist. It develops when a hair follicle becomes clogged and dead skin cells and oil build up in the pore. Bacteria growth in the clogged follicle might also contribute to acne. While acne can affect people of all ages, it's most common in the teenage years. People most often develop acne on their face, but it also commonly appears on the upper body, including the chest, neck, shoulders and upper arms.

## Types of Acne

There are several types of acne, including:

- **Comedonal acne.** A type of acne commonly known as whiteheads and blackheads, which are clogged pores.
- **Inflammatory acne.** Bumps are red and pink pimples and blemishes.
- **Nodulocystic acne.** Bumps tend to be larger, more painful acne cysts that can lead to scarring.

## What Causes Acne?

Acne forms when hair follicles become clogged with oil, dead skin cells and bacteria. If your hair follicle is blocked, bacterial growth and inflammation can result, and you'll see pimples and blemishes when you look in the mirror. Your sebaceous, or oil, glands may also become overactive.

Hormones are a primary [cause of acne](#), particularly testosterone, which you may be surprised to learn affects both males and females. As a result, hormonal swings that creep up during the premenstrual period, pregnancy and menopause can cause acne. Hormonal acne is sometimes defined as a distinct type of acne that affects young and middle-aged adults. Women dealing with hormonal acne may be prescribed birth control medications to help control their symptoms.

Additionally, some skin care products can clog pores and cause acne to pop up. Eating a high-sugar diet, feeling stressed or having poor stress-management techniques may also contribute to acne development, regardless of your age.

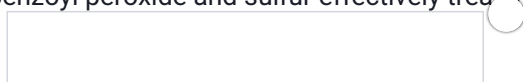
## Acne Medications

Acne treatments can have a variety of ingredients. Below are some of the common ingredients you'll find in over-the-counter or prescribed products.

- **Salicylic acid** is a type of beta hydroxy acid that unclogs pores. Because it's oil soluble, it can penetrate pores better than water-soluble ingredients. Salicylic acid is ideal for treating comedonal acne, also known as whiteheads and blackheads.
- **Benzoyl peroxide** directly targets bacteria that cause inflammatory acne, which you'll see as red and pink pimples and blemishes.
- **Adapalene** is a type of medication called a retinoid, a vitamin A derivative. It promotes skin cell turnover, gently exfoliates the skin and unclogs pores. It also decreases acne-causing inflammation. Using adapalene consistently can improve skin texture, pigmentation and fine lines over time. Adapalene is available over the counter.
- **Tretinoin** is a commonly used prescription form of a retinoid, which is stronger than adapalene. It is not available over the counter. It works by stimulating the growth of new skin cells, regulating oil production and unclogging pores. Retin-A is the brand name for prescription retinol.
- **Azelaic Acid** is a gentle skin care acid that is one of my favorite ingredients for treating acne in pregnant or breastfeeding women, as some acne treatments are not safe for those groups. It has exfoliating, antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties and can help improve pigmentation.
- **Sulfur** is a naturally occurring element with powerful antibacterial and anti-inflammatory acne-fighting abilities.
- **Niacinamide**, or vitamin B3, is beneficial for decreasing skin redness and oiliness while improving skin texture.

## Best OTC Acne Treatments

Over-the-counter acne treatments are generally effective for treating mild acne. Ingredients in these products target different types of acne. For example, benzoyl peroxide and sulfur effectively treat inflammatory acne (red and pink



acne bumps), whereas salicylic acid is better for comedonal acne (whiteheads and blackheads). Adapalene is an over-the-counter retinoid that both treats and prevents acne.

Prescription products with higher-strength ingredients may be needed for moderate or severe forms of acne. It's important to note that most acne treatments require at least four to eight weeks to see improvement and up to 16 weeks for acne to clear.

## Home Remedies for Acne

As a dermatologist, I typically don't recommend at-home acne remedies because many have limited evidence and possible side effects. However, applying ice may help temporarily reduce pain and swelling. Rather than placing ice directly on the skin, consider wrapping ice cubes in a clean towel and then applying them to your skin for 30 to 60 seconds at a time. You should avoid icing if you struggle with [rosacea](#) or sensitive skin, as temperature changes could flare these conditions.

Though your daily habits do not [cause acne](#), your lifestyle can certainly worsen an existing problem. Experts recommend the following to prevent a flare-up:

- Eat a healthy diet that contains few refined starches.
- Practice stress-management techniques.
- Avoid pressure and friction from a backpack, purse straps, athletic equipment or tight clothes.
- Don't scrub or clean your skin too aggressively.
- Keep your hands off acne, and don't squeeze or pick blemishes.
- Avoid tanning beds and humid environments like saunas.
- Shampoo your hair frequently, especially if you have oily hair.
- Choose gentle cleansers and skin care products to avoid anything too harsh or drying.
- Use oil-free hair and skin care products that won't clog pores.
- Practice [healthy sleep habits](#) since a lack of rest can contribute to acne.
- Regularly clean anything that touches your face, such as phones, makeup brushes and pillowcases.

## When to See a Doctor

It's always a good idea to consult a professional for a personalized approach to treat skin conditions like acne. A [dermatologist](#) is specifically trained to diagnose, treat and prevent all types and severities of acne. It's especially important to see a dermatologist for acne that doesn't respond to over-the-counter products, hurts or causes scarring. OTC acne products are ideal for mild acne. However, moderate and severe acne likely require stronger treatments. In addition, large, painful acne cysts often require prescription medications and can lead to [skin scarring](#) if not treated early on. I also recommend seeing a [doctor](#) for support and effective solutions, especially if your acne causes emotional distress.

## Best OTC Medicine & Health Products

See other top-recommended brands for similar categories.

