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ADULT ACNE TREATMENT DERMATOLOGISTS RECOMMEND

Are you 25 or older and seeing pimples, whiteheads, or blackheads when you look in the mirror? You're not alone. An increasing number of adults, especially women, are battling breakouts.

With so many acne products available online and in stores, it's hard to know which lotion, wash, or wipe can help clear your skin.

To get the lowdown, we asked two board-certified dermatologists how to treat adult acne at home.

Who can treat acne at home?

"Many adults who have mild acne can effectively treat it with over-the-counter (available without a prescription), acne-fighting products available today," says Ramone F. Williams, MD, MPhil, FAAD.

Mild acne means that you may have blackheads and whiteheads along with small pimples, or just small pimples.

If you have large, painful pimples that sit deep in your skin or acne that leaves a scar when it clears, you'll need to see a dermatologist for treatment. Products that you can buy online or in a store are unlikely to treat these types of acne effectively.

Dr. Williams says, "If you're pregnant or trying to get pregnant, consult a dermatologist before treating acne on your own." Some acne treatments you can buy without a prescription aren't safe to use during pregnancy."



Which non-prescription treatments do dermatologists recommend for adult acne?

It's all about the active ingredient in the product, according to Julie Harper, MD, FAAD.

Tip for using acne products: When shopping for acne-fighting products, you want to find one product that contains an active ingredient which can effectively treat the type of acne you have.

Use that product for 6 to 8 weeks, taking care to use the product as directed on the instructions. During this time, don't add another product. Don't stop using the product you started with.

The active ingredients that Drs. Harper and Williams recommend using to help clear mild-to-moderate adult acne are:

- **Adapalene:** A retinoid, this active ingredient helps to clear blackheads, whiteheads, and pimples.
- **Azelaic acid:** It fights acne and can also fade the dark spots that appear when an acne spot clears.
- **Benzoyl peroxide:** This acne-fighter is especially effective at treating mild pimples. While you'll find products that contain up to 10% benzoyl peroxide, it's best to start with a product that contains 2.5%. That will help you avoid side effects like dry, irritated skin or a burning sensation.
- **Salicylic acid:** Because it unclogs pores and exfoliates the skin, salicylic acid works best on whiteheads and blackheads.

Your
Dermatologist
Knows

IS TOOTHPASTE AN EFFECTIVE AT-HOME TREATMENT FOR ADULT ACNE?



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Absolutely not! Keep your toothpaste for your teeth and rely on clinically proven acne-fighting ingredients like adapalene, benzoyl peroxide, and salicylic acid to treat your adult acne.

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— Julie Harper, MD, FAAD



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No. Toothpaste often contains abrasive ingredients like calcium or baking soda, whitening agents like peroxide, color, and flavor. None of these ingredients fight acne, but they can irritate or harm your skin.

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— Ramone F. Williams, MD, MPhil, FAAD

How to apply your acne medication for best results

The results you see depend in part on how you apply your acne medication.

Dr. Harper says, “You want to apply a thin layer of acne medication to the whole area rather than just your acne spots. When you put medication only on the acne you see, you treat what’s there. By applying medication to all your acne-prone skin, you treat the existing acne and prevent the next breakout.”

When to expect results from acne medication

When treating acne, you need to be patient. Acne medication doesn’t work overnight. You must also use the medication(s) consistently and as directed. If the medication works for you, Dr. Harper says you can expect to see:

- **Fewer breakouts:** 4 to 8 weeks

- **Clearing:** 16 weeks after starting the medication

It's important to understand that no one acne treatment works for everyone. Everyone's skin is unique.

Who should see a board-certified dermatologist?

Dr. Harper says, "If you are not achieving the desired results after weeks of using your acne treatment, it is time to see your dermatologist. Our goal is to help you to clear your acne."

Dr. Williams adds, "If you are seeing dark spots on your skin after acne clears, it's also time to see a dermatologist."

Those dark spots, which more commonly develop in people with darker skin tones, are called post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation (PIH). They indicate that acne is causing significant inflammation. When you have lots of inflammation, treatment that you can buy without a prescription usually cannot effectively treat acne. A dermatologist can develop a treatment plan that helps to clear your acne and prevent more dark spots.

Of course, you don't have to try treating acne on your own before seeing a dermatologist. Dr. Harper points out, "It is never the wrong time to see a dermatologist for adult acne. For example, there is no acne that is too mild to potentially benefit from seeing your dermatologist."

Dr. Harper leaves us with this final thought, "If you want to try to manage your acne yourself first, that's fine, but if you are not achieving clear skin within a few months, then please make an appointment. We would love to help!"

To find a dermatologist who can help you with adult acne, go to [Find a dermatologist](#).

Related AAD resources

- [How Natalie finally cleared her adult acne](#)
- [9 things to try when acne won't clear](#)
- [Adult acne: Why it happens and what you can do about it](#)

Images

Image 1: Getty Images

Images 2,3: Courtesy of Drs. Harper and Williams

References

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