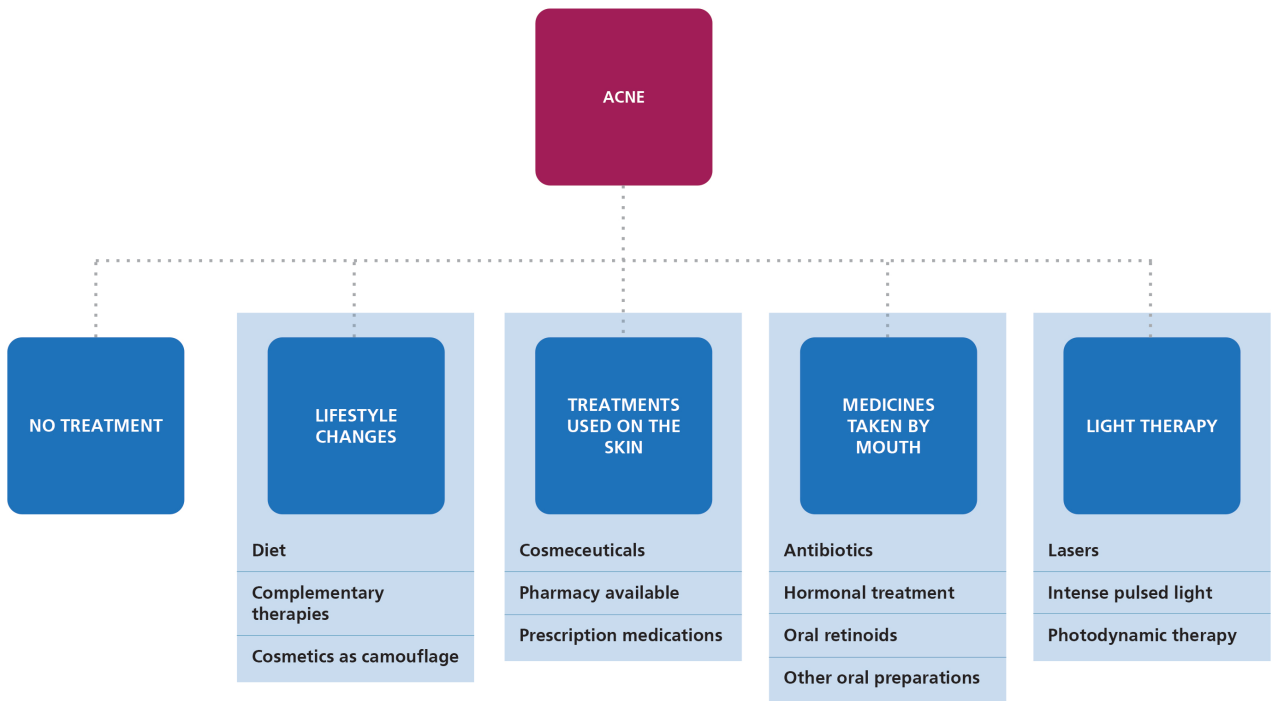


Deciding what to do about acne

This short decision aid is to help you decide what to do about your acne. You can use it on your own, or with your doctor, to help you make a decision about what's right for you at this time.

This decision aid talks about five types of treatment for acne:

- **No treatment.** Waiting and checking to see if the acne stays the same, gets worse, or gets better on its own.
- **Lifestyle changes.** This can include making changes to diet, using complementary therapies, and using cosmetics to cover up acne.
- **Treatments used on the skin.** Creams, gels, and washes used directly on the skin. These are often called **topical treatments**. Some can be bought at a pharmacy or shop. Others are prescribed by a GP or skin specialist (dermatologist).
- **Medicines.** Medicines (oral pills and capsules) taken by mouth. They include medicines to fight the bacteria that are associated with acne, and medicines that reduce the amount of sebum (oil) the skin makes. They also include combined oral contraceptive pills, which are not suitable for girls who have not begun their menstrual periods.
- **Light therapy.** Light or lasers beamed at the skin by a machine. Light therapies kill the bacteria associated with acne. Light therapy can also shrink the glands in the skin that produce sebum and can help to reduce acne inflammation (redness and swelling).



What are my options?

Treatment	What is the treatment?
No treatment	Not everyone with acne decides to have treatment. Some people prefer to wait and see if their acne clears up on its own. Anyone can decide not to have treatment. People are usually advised to consider treatment if their acne is more severe, or likely to become more severe.
Lifestyle changes	Lifestyle changes are things people do for themselves, including making changes to diet, using complementary therapies, and using cosmetics to cover up acne. Anyone can try lifestyle changes, whether their acne is mild, moderate, or severe.
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	<p>Treatments that are applied to the skin are called topical therapies. They come in a number of forms including creams, gels, foams, and washes. Some contain just one type of medicine and others contain a combination of medicines. Some topical therapies can be bought without a prescription at pharmacies and shops. Others need a prescription from your doctor.</p> <p>Most people with acne can choose treatments used on the skin. People with mild or moderate acne are more likely to be advised to try these treatments.</p>
Oral medicines	<p>Oral medicines are taken by mouth (tablets or capsules). They treat your whole body rather than just the affected area of skin. Oral medicines include medicines to fight the bacteria that are associated with acne, and medicines that reduce the amount of sebum (oil) the skin makes. They also include combined oral contraceptive pills, which are not suitable for girls who have not begun their menstrual periods.</p> <p>Oral medicines are usually used to treat moderate to severe acne. Oral medicines are only available with a doctor's prescription.</p>
Light therapy	Light therapy (also called 'photo-therapy') involves using machines to focus certain types of light at the skin. If you have mild or moderate acne that hasn't responded to topical therapies, you might want to consider light therapy. Light therapies work by killing bacteria, by reducing inflammation, or by shrinking the glands that make sebum.

Treatment	What is the effect on symptoms?
No treatment	If people don't have treatment for acne, it may get better, it may stay the same, or it may get worse. Most people find acne lasts for several years.[1]
Lifestyle changes	<p>A low glycaemic-index (GI) diet (one rich in beans, seeds, wholegrains, vegetables, and fruit) may improve acne, but we need more proof before we can be sure.[2]</p> <p>We don't know if complementary therapies improve acne.[3]</p> <p>Cosmetics can't improve acne but they can cover it up.</p>
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	<p>Topical retinoids can improve blackheads, whiteheads, and inflammatory acne.[4]</p> <p>Topical treatments such as benzoyl peroxide, antibiotics, and retinoids can improve mild to moderate acne. They tend to work faster, and clear up more spots, when used in combination than when used alone.[5]</p> <p>Combinations of topical treatment that work for mild and moderate acne are: benzoyl peroxide and adapalene, and benzoyl peroxide and clindamycin. [6]</p>
Oral medicines	<p>Antibiotics can improve moderate and severe acne, although no antibiotic gets rid of acne completely. [7] Antibiotics are all equally good at treating acne. There is no antibiotic that is better than the others.[8]</p> <p>Oral antibiotics usually work better when a topical treatment, especially a retinoid (adapalene), azelaic acid, or benzoyl peroxide, is used as well.[9]</p> <p>Some combined oral contraceptives can improve inflammatory (red and swollen) acne and non-inflammatory acne.[10]</p> <p>Isotretinoin can improve severe acne. A 20-week course of isotretinoin improves symptoms in about 85 in 100 people with severe acne.[11]</p>
Light therapy	Light therapy can improve inflammatory acne in the short term.[12] We don't know how well it works in the long term.[13] We don't know if light therapy works for blackheads and whiteheads.[14]

Treatment	What is the effect on quality of life?
No treatment	<p>People with acne sometimes feel low, anxious, or embarrassed about their skin. They may avoid social activities as a result. This can affect their quality of life.[15]</p> <p>People who don't have therapy may get scars. Scars, especially on the face, can have a negative impact on a person's quality of life.</p>
Lifestyle changes	<p>People with acne sometimes feel low, anxious, or embarrassed about their skin. They may avoid social activities as a result. This can affect their quality of life.[16] Any treatment that improves your acne is likely to improve your quality of life.</p> <p>We don't know if changing diet or complementary therapies affect quality of life. Cosmetics that mask the redness or skin changes caused by acne may make people feel more confident about socialising.</p> <p>Any treatment that improves your acne is likely to improve your quality of life.</p>
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	<p>People with acne sometimes feel low, anxious, or embarrassed about their skin. They may avoid social activities as a result. This can affect their quality of life.[17] Any treatment that improves your acne is likely to improve your quality of life.</p> <p>People who use certain treatments, such as adapalene-benzoyl peroxide combination gel, have reported improvements in their quality of life.[18] We don't know if this is true for all topical treatments.</p>
Oral medicines	<p>People with acne sometimes feel low, anxious, or embarrassed about their skin. They may avoid social activities as a result. This can affect their quality of life.[19] Any treatment that improves your acne is likely to improve your quality of life.</p> <p>We don't know if taking an antibiotic or the combined oral contraceptive pill for acne improves people's quality of life.</p> <p>People taking isotretinoin have some restrictions on their daily life, for example they should not use sun beds, or have waxing to remove hair. Women taking isotretinoin who could become pregnant need to use one or two reliable forms of contraception, because isotretinoin can cause birth defects.</p>
Light therapy	<p>People with acne sometimes feel low, anxious, or embarrassed about their skin. They may avoid social activities as a result. This can affect their quality of life.[20] Any treatment that improves your acne is likely to improve your quality of life.</p> <p>Light therapy sometimes makes the skin look worse (at least for a few days) before it makes it look better. This could make people feel less happy about their quality of life for a few days, before they see improvement.</p>

Treatment	What side effects or complications does treatment have?
No treatment	If acne is left untreated, especially in the first three years of developing spots, it can leave permanent scars.
Lifestyle changes	<p>Moderate changes to the diet are unlikely to cause side effects.</p> <p>There are too many complementary therapies to list all of their possible side effects.</p> <p>Non-comedogenic (non-spot forming), hypoallergenic (non-allergy forming) cosmetics are unlikely to cause side effects.</p>
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	Possible side effects of topical treatments include dry skin, redness, stinging, itching, and burning. Azelaic acid can make the skin sensitive to sunlight.
Oral medicines	<p>Possible side effects of antibiotics include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, difficulty swallowing, thrush (yeast infection), and sensitivity to sunlight (photosensitivity). Some antibiotics are more likely to cause severe side effects than others.[21]</p> <p>Possible side effects of the combined oral contraceptive pill include mood changes, breast tenderness, fluid retention, headache, and nausea.</p> <p>Possible side effects of isotretinoin include dry skin, dry eyes, itching, rashes, headaches, joint and muscle pain, back pain, sensitivity to the sun, possible diarrhoea in some people, and raised cholesterol levels. Isotretinoin is known to damage unborn babies. Women who could get pregnant who are prescribed isotretinoin need to use contraception to prevent pregnancy. Using isotretinoin has also been linked to depression in some people, but we don't know enough to say for sure that this is the case.</p>
Light therapy	<p>Possible side effects of light therapy are pain, redness of the skin, swelling, itching, and increased skin pigmentation. With photodynamic therapy, these side effects are often much more severe, causing more people to stop treatment early.[22]</p> <p>How bad the side effects are depends on several things, such as the type of light used (wavelength), the type of machine used, and the experience of the operator.</p>

Treatment	How much time is spent on treatment?
No treatment	People who don't have treatment won't need to spend time on it.
Lifestyle changes	Acne can last for several years. Lifestyle changes such as a different diet or use of cosmetics will need to be continued for as long as acne is still a problem, assuming that they are helpful. There are many types of complementary therapy which require different numbers of treatments or length of time taking treatment.
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	<p>Most topical treatments are used daily. People need to continue treatment for six to eight weeks to find out if it's working.[23] If a topical treatment is working, it can usually be continued for as long as it helps. This may not be the case with topical antibiotics.[24] Acne can last for several years.</p> <p>GPs can only give prescriptions for two months at a time, so if you are using a prescribed topical therapy you may have to go to your GP to get a repeat prescription. Some GPs' clinics and pharmacies let you order repeat prescriptions online, which saves a visit to the GP. You can pick the medicine up at the pharmacy or have it posted to your home.</p>
Oral medicines	<p>Antibiotics are usually taken every day. If they work, doctors recommend people carry on taking them for six months.[25]</p> <p>The combined oral contraceptive pill is usually taken every day. If it works, doctors recommend women carry on taking it for six months, or as long as they need contraception.[26]</p> <p>Isotretinoin is usually taken every day. It should be taken for at least six months.[27]</p> <p>GPs can only give prescriptions for two months at a time, so you usually have to go to your GP to get a repeat prescription. Some GPs' clinics and pharmacies let you order repeat prescriptions online, which saves a visit to the GP. You can pick the medicine up at the pharmacy or have it posted to your home.</p>
Light therapy	Light therapy treatments last from 15 minutes per session to one hour per session. Having several treatments is likely to work better than having one or two treatments.[28]

Treatment	Will I have to pay for my treatment?
No treatment	People who don't have treatment won't pay anything.
Lifestyle changes	Complementary therapies to treat acne and cosmetics to conceal acne are not available on the NHS. People who choose these will need to pay for them. Some are cheap, others are expensive.
Treatments used on the skin (topical treatments)	Some topical therapies are available on prescription. People have to pay for washes, gels, and creams that don't require a prescription. These products can be bought in pharmacies or shops and range from inexpensive to expensive.
Oral medicines	Oral medicines to treat acne are available on the NHS with a prescription.
Light therapy	Light therapy is generally not available on the NHS. Home light therapy devices can be bought in pharmacies and online. Light therapy is also available from private clinics. There are many different types of light therapy and prices vary depending on the type of light therapy, the clinic, and the practitioner. Treatment can be expensive.

What are the pros and cons of each option?

People with acne have different experiences about the health problem and views on treatment. Choosing the treatment option that is best for the patient means considering how the consequences of each treatment option will affect their life.

Here are some questions people may want to consider about treatment for acne:

- Are they willing to wait and see what happens to their acne?
- How important is it for them to have a treatment that has the best chance of clearing up their acne?
- How important is it for them to have a treatment that will improve their quality of life?
- Are they willing to take the risk of side effects or complications from treatment?
- Are they willing to spend much time having treatment?
- Are they willing to pay privately for treatment?