



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/TIMES

LINDA PIAZZA, 40, of Dublin, receives an injection of kenalog, a steroid, from Dr. Jerome Potozkin to treat adult acne. "It's much better than having zits," says Piazza.

Adult acne: Clear causes, cures

Experts help sufferers face skin problems head-on

By Jessica Yadegaran
TIMES STAFF WRITER

LINDA PIAZZA escaped adolescence with few pimples. Unfortunately, she has to deal with acne as an adult.

It started when she was 30. Through with having her children and in a high-stress consulting job, Piazza began breaking out on her face. Over-the-counter products didn't help. A dermatologist prescribed an antibiotic that gave Piazza horrible panic attacks. Later, a day spa treated her acne with a chemical peel that made the raised, red bumps even worse.

"I was in tears," recalls Piazza, now 40, of Dublin. "At my age, I

ContraCostaTimes.com

■ Got a question about adult acne? Ask Walnut Creek dermatologist Dr. Jerome Potozkin or Acne.org founder Dan Kern in our online Q&A from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Dec. 12. You can submit your questions now.

didn't understand why I had acne."

Piazza is not alone. An estimated 50 percent of adult men and women suffer from acne, the blockage of an oil gland that results in a blemish. They exhaust over-the-counter options and pop prescribed pills with unwanted

side effects, to no avail.

While most acne is genetic, hormonal or related to stress, the oil chemistry of adult acne is more challenging than teen acne, explains Dennis Gross, a New York dermatologist and author of "Your Future Face."

"Adult oil is a greater source of nutrients to bacteria," Dr. Gross says. "That bacteria builds up and is then attacked by the immune system, causing the blemish to become more red and inflamed."

So it's even more crucial to find the proper treatments as an adult. It took Piazza a decade to find the right dermatologist and regimen — oral and topical — to clear up her skin while preventing future blemishes. That is the

trick to treating acne, says her dermatologist, Jerome Potozkin of Walnut Creek.

The onset of adult acne is usually in the late 20s to early 30s. It is often more severe in women, who have a greater fluctuation of hormonal changes in adulthood, from weaning off birth control pills to pregnancy and menopause.

"The pregnant woman is the most challenging to treat," Dr. Potozkin says. "Oral treatments are put on the back burner in favor of lasers and topicals."

For men, the main cause is shaving, which can cause ingrown hairs and razor bumps that become infected.

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ACNE MYTH BUSTERS

- Acne is not a teenager's skin disease.
- Overwashing your face does not prevent acne; it can exacerbate it.
- The jury's still out on diet and acne; to be safe, lower your iodide intake.
- Drink lots of water and get plenty of vitamin B.
- Wash your face after exercise.
- Spot reduction is not as effective as treating the whole face.
- Flat acne (blackheads) and inflamed acne (whiteheads, cysts, pustules) should be treated differently.
- If left untreated, noninflammatory acne can become inflamed.

— Sources include Dennis Gross, M.D., and Laura Cooksey, Face Reality Skin Care

Acne

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Genetics and stress are factors for both genders. The relationship between acne and stress is a vicious cycle.

"Stress increases cortisol, which changes the chemistry of oil," Dr. Gross explains. "This change can then lead to acne, which definitely causes more stress — thus more cortisol."

Angry and unable to get clear, many adults experience depression and damaged self-esteem.

"They feel that acne is only something for teenagers, making them feel unprofessional and insecure," Dr. Gross says. "On top of all this, most are lost and confused about what steps to take in order to correct the condition."

With so many products in a growing category of the \$8.2 billion skin care industry, the choices can be daunting. The biggest problem: Many adults dry out their skin with use of oil-stripping products or excessive washing. This exacerbates the acne.

"The resulting dead skin adds more debris to an already clogged pore, congesting the complexion even more," Dr. Gross explains.

Dan Kern's acne started at age 11. In his case, it just never stopped.

By college, Kern had tried salicylic acid, Retin-A, clindamycin, a topical antibiotic, and sulfur to reduce hundreds of pimples on his face. All yielded little results. The latter two actually made it worse.

"My skin plummeted to levels I had never seen," says Kern, now 34, of San Francisco.

By his early 20s, Kern had severe cystic lesions and pustules on his back.

"I would never consider removing my shirt for anyone," he recalls. "At my low point, I would not look at myself in the mirror. I just kept the light off in the bathroom and slept 14 hours a day."

He was eventually prescribed Accutane, which cleared him up completely. Five months later, however, the whiteheads resurfaced.

Frustrated, Kern recalled that benzoyl peroxide — generous applications of high concentrations — was the only treatment that consistently cleared his skin. Studies show that benzoyl peroxide kills 99.6 percent of bacteria on skin.

He added gentle washing and an oil-free moisturizer, and, sure

ACNE RESOURCES

■ **Acne.org:** Founder Dan Kern's nonprofit site with chat rooms, support, product recommendations and Kern's story of curing himself after 13 years with severe acne. His dermatologist-approved regimen has helped thousands.

■ **Mdskincare.com:** Dr. Dennis Gross, a New York dermatologist and author of "Your Future Face" (Viking) has a line of products for problem skin.

■ **Aad.org:** American Academy of Dermatology lists local dermatologists who specialize in acne.

■ **Face Reality Skin Care:** Licensed aesthetician and former acne sufferer Laura Cooksey runs this San Leandro clinic for problem skin. www.facerealityskincare.com, 510-351-1842.

■ **Acne Treatment Clinic:** Licensed aesthetician and former acne sufferer Pamela Swartz runs this Walnut Creek clinic for acne sufferers. www.acnetreatment.com, 925-933-8425.

— Jessica Yadegaran

Types and Causes

Women

■ **Hormonal fluctuations:** Oil chemistry changes post-pregnancy, premenstrual and post-menopausal. Stopping use of birth control pills can trigger acne.

■ **Acne cosmetica:** Pore-clogging powders and other cosmetics lead to blackheads and other flat acne.

Men

■ **Improper shaving:** Causes ingrown hairs that block oil glands and become infected.

■ **Poor product selection:** Harsh soaps dry out skin; resulting dead skin adds more debris to already clogged pores.

Both

■ **Stress:** Increases cortisol, which changes oil chemistry. This change can lead to acne.

■ **Genetics:** Acne is a hereditary disease of the pores.

■ **Mechanics:** "Cell phone" acne on the chin; acne from repetitive touch-

ing of the skin or wearing hats or helmets.

■ **Diet/environment:** Some experts link acne to diets high in salt, changes in humidity and high levels of calcium or magnesium in a city's tap water.

— Sources include Dennis Gross, M.D. and Julie Anusevicius, Face Reality Skin Care

Treatments

Solutions vary depending on the cause, severity and type of acne. Remember to wash the face with bare hands and a gentle cleanser and follow with an oil-free moisturizer containing sunscreen.

Over-the-counter

■ **Always start here.** The two antibacterial products are salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide. Studies prove the 2.5 percent version of the latter is as effective as 5 percent, without the over-drying.

Topical prescriptions

■ **If over-the-counter products don't help,** it's time to see a dermatologist. He or she will most likely prescribe a topical gel that has two antibacterials in it, usually benzoyl peroxide and clindamycin. If that doesn't work, he or she may try a retinol-based ointment such as Differin or Retin-A, plus an oral antibiotic. Accutane is prescribed for cystic acne. Most of these treatments cause acne to worsen before it gets better.

Exfoliants

■ **Serums and peels** containing exfoliating ingredients such as vitamin C or glycolic, salicylic or lactic acids can be administered by a dermatologist or licensed aesthetician on a regular basis. Some experience irritation with this treatment.

Other options

■ **Laser- and light-based therapies** are used on those who see little or no results with traditional therapies. Injectable steroids can also be used to spot reduce a pronounced blemish in a matter of days.

— Sources include Jerome Potozkin, M.D.

Care, an acne clinic in San Leandro. Laura Cooksey, the licensed esthetician and acne expert there, got Tyda clear in eight weeks.

Cooksey treated Tyda's acne by building her up to a 10 percent benzoyl peroxide, staying one step ahead of the skin's adaptive process and adding exfoliants, antibacterials and peels along the way.

Cooksey, who's been treating acne since 1990, studied under Miami dermatologist James Fulton, the co-inventor of Retin-A and author of "Acne RX." Many of Cooksey's clients come to her after popular products, like Proactiv or Accutane, stop working, she says. Cooksey sees her patients every two weeks and clears 90 percent of them, usually within three months, she says.

While dermatologists disregard diet as a cause of acne, Cooksey is a believer. Iodides, or salt, and various hormones found in milk and peanuts contribute to acne, she says. She asks clients to watch their intake.

"It's not the oil in French fries, it's the salt," she explains.

Cooksey also sees cases of acne cosmetica, which is caused by pore-clogging oils, like lanolin and cocoa butter, in makeup. She custom blends a mineral makeup for her acne-prone clients. Isopropyl myristate, a common ingredient in makeup, and, ironically, the cream form of Retin-A, also clogs pores.

"You'd want to give the cream form to the anti-aging client because it penetrates the skin," Cooksey says. "But you'd never want to give it to an acne-sufferer."

There, perhaps, lies the benefit of having acne as an adult.

"Most exfoliants — glycolic, salicylic and lactic acids, and vitamin A — are great for both acne and anti-aging," Cooksey says.

Dolores Settera is 73. She's had acne since she was 14 and recalls the days of tar soaps and x-ray treatments.

"It's kind of been a blessing because I haven't had to deal with wrinkles and stuff," says Settera, of Oakland.

Acne keeps her young in spirit, too.

"My husband and I had reservations for our 30th anniversary last year and I looked like a unicorn with a pimple right on my nose," she recalls, laughing. "I guess there are some things you just don't outgrow."

Jessica Yadegaran is a lifestyle writer for the Times. Reach her at jyadegaran@cctimes.com or 925-943-8155.

enough, he zapped the zits forever.

"My skin stayed clear, day after day, week after week," Kern says.

Determined to help others, he studied the subject and 11 years ago founded Acne.org, where he talks to thousands of adult sufferers, some in their 60s. In 2004, backed by a St. Louis dermatologist, he wrote "Clear Skin: Heal Your Skin and End the Break-outs, Once and For All."

Kim Tyda had no luck with dermatologists, either.

Break-outs started last year, when she moved from Sacramento to Alameda. A dermatologist prescribed Differin. The ointment increased her acne.

"I broke out in places I'd never had pimples before," says Tyda, 37. "I'd wake up one day and be clear and the next, when I had to give a presentation, I was totally broken out on my chin."

Online, she read about similar reactions, and stumbled upon a thread on the Berkeley Parents Network about Face Reality Skin