



BEAUTY  
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# Our Comprehensive Guide To The 7 Types Of Acne: Causes + How To Treat Each

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Acne, the complex skin condition it is, comes in many, many forms. Each zit is technically born the same way—dead skin, oil, and gunk stick together and block the pores—but from there, it can develop into various types of blemishes. Some are large, red, and tender to the touch (like cysts); others are speckled across your skin, causing textural concerns (hello, blackheads and whiteheads).

Here, we dive into the seven types of acne, the causes, and how to best treat each spot.

While we're here, we should note: These tips only scratch the surface in terms of remedies, as treating acne requires a much more holistic view—diet, stress, and sleep can all affect the condition (we repeat: It's complex!), but this article will focus on specific ingredients for each blemish.

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## **Non-inflammatory versus inflammatory acne.**

Each type of acne technically falls into one of two buckets: non-inflammatory or inflammatory. To be clear, all acne stems from some level of inflammation. (This distinction is a bit of a misnomer, but it helps us distinguish the aesthetic differences.) A few types are more tender, puffy, and angry than others—those are classified as "inflammatory." Papules, pustules, nodules, and cysts fall into this category, as they're all typically red and painful.

"Non-inflammatory" acne, on the other hand, results in subtler mounds—these are your whiteheads, blackheads, and subclinical breakouts. Also known as comedonal acne, the bumps tend to be flesh-toned (aside from blackheads, which are darker in color). It's typically caused by clogged hair follicles and found where the skin is more oily, like the chest, back, and T-zone area of the face.

Non-inflammatory acne can become inflamed later on when there is an overgrowth of bacteria (specifically *Cutibacterium acnes*), which can cause the release of inflammatory cytokines and messengers to create clinical inflammation. So again, all acne is inflammation on some level.

## Whiteheads

"Closed comedones are whiteheads; they look like tiny whitish or flesh-colored bumps on the surface of the skin," board-certified dermatologist [Daniel Belkin, M.D.](#), once shared with mbg.

Now, whiteheads are not the large, tender zits with a big pus-filled center (those are pustules, which we'll get into later). Rather, because whiteheads are not inflamed, they are much subtler. Think small, fleshy bumps on the skin, caused by dead skin, excess oil, and overall debris blocking the pores.

### How to treat it:

- **AHAs or BHAs:** Sloughing off the dead skin can help you avoid clogging the pores in the first place. Salicylic acid is a fabulous option for oily skin (since it's oil-soluble and can really shimmy into the pores), while AHAs like [lactic acid](#) are typically more hydrating and fit for those with drier or sensitive skin types.
- **Retinol:** "Retinol and retinoids enhance the skin's normal turnover process to prevent dead skin cells from accumulating in the pore," says board-certified dermatologist [Daniel Belkin, M.D.](#), of the Laser & Skin Surgery Center of New York. Find our favorite OTC options [here](#).
- **Pore-clearing masks:** Ingredients like activated charcoal and [clay](#) are popular in pore-clearing masks, as these draw out excess oil and gunk from the pores, thus preventing those bumps from forming.

## Summary

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Exfoliators, like AHAs, BHAs, and retinol, can help unclog the plug at its source and keep those comedones from cropping up. Activated charcoal and clay can help absorb excess oil as well.

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## Blackheads

Blackheads form the same way whiteheads do (i.e., when the pore becomes blocked with gunk and oil) with one caveat: They're considered open comedones. "An open comedone, or blackhead, occurs when this debris is exposed to the air, whereas a closed comedone, or whitehead, occurs when the debris is just under the surface of the skin and not exposed to the air," says Belkin. That oxygen exposure is also what makes them turn dark in color.

### How to treat it.

Blackheads and whiteheads are cut from the same cloth (aside from the oxidation of the plug), so you can treat them pretty similarly:

- **AHAs, BHAs & clays:** Again, choose your adventure here. "Cleansers with salicylic acid, clay masks, and chemical exfoliants with alpha- and beta-hydroxy acids can all help to exfoliate the skin and make your skin less prone to developing blackheads," says board-certified dermatologist [Raechele Cochran Gathers, M.D.](#)
- **Blackhead removers:** You can find a slew of market products dedicated to this very issue, from daily toners to blackhead masks to treatment gels (you won't find any pore strips—as those do not actually unclog the plug at its source). Find our favorites [here](#).
- **DIY masks:** Or concoct your [very own blackhead mask](#) from the comfort of your own kitchen. Plenty of natural ingredients can gently dissolve dead skin cells and lift debris from those pores (think plain yogurt, activated charcoal, and honey); just make sure you opt for organic ingredients, if you can.

## Summary

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Look for exfoliators to unclog the pores (AHAs and BHAs), as well as clay to draw out debris. You can also find blackhead removers on the market, like blackhead-specific toners, masks, or gel treatments.

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## Subclinical acne

OK, technically, "[subclinical acne](#)" is not a term used in dermatology, but it's used enough in skin care conversations to earn a spot on our list. Essentially, it's a fancy way of saying "congested skin," and it's synonymous with whiteheads.

"They are non-painful and usually do not lead to scarring or skin discoloration," says Ife Rodney, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist and founder of [Eternal Dermatology](#). The flesh-colored bumps never seem to come to a "head," but they can progress into pimples or pustules if they become inflamed—which can happen if they're left untreated.

### How to treat it:

- **Salicylic acid:** At the risk of sounding like a broken record: BHAs are superb for comedonal acne, as the ingredient can penetrate deep into the pores and help break up the pore-clogging material.
- **Retinol:** Again, retinol is A+ for preventing comedones as well. "Topical retinoids have a comedolytic effect, meaning that they help to [prevent and treat clogged pores](#)," board-certified dermatologist [Hadley King, M.D.](#), once [explained to mbg](#). "This is because they increase the turnover of skin cells and reduce the tendency of cells and keratin debris to clump together."
- **Benzoyl peroxide:** Benzoyl peroxide can kill acne-causing bacteria *and* help break up pore-clogging agents, like dead skin cells (which can lead to subclinical acne). If you do use retinols, though, you may want to tread carefully: "When benzoyl peroxide and [retinoids \(or retinols\)](#) are used at the same time, they may interact and make them both less effective," Rodney mentions. If you do use retinol, she recommends sticking to a benzoyl peroxide face wash in the morning, so you can apply retinol at night, and the two won't interact.

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## Summary

To clear those clogged pores, exfoliators like salicylic acid and retinol are your friends. Benzoyl peroxide can also help break up the gunk trapped in the follicles.

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## Papules

Now, let's enter inflammatory acne territory. "Papules look like solid red bumps, while pustules have pus at the top," board-certified dermatologist [Zenovia Gabriel, M.D.](#), FAAD, says regarding [forehead acne](#). Think of the stereotypical red-colored bump you may associate with acne—that's a papule. It starts out as a comedone (either closed or open), then becomes inflamed when bacteria that lives on the skin overgrows inside that clogged pore.

### How to treat it:

- **Aloe vera:** Don't scoff just yet. Not only is aloe vera chock-full of anti-inflammatory vitamins, enzymes, minerals, and amino acids to soothe angry papules, but it also [contains natural salicylic acids](#) to help unplug the acne at the source. Plus, aloe has some antimicrobial properties: In fact, aloe used topically in combination with tretinoin cream (a prescription-strength retinoid) was found to be [effective in treating inflammatory and noninflammatory acne](#).
- **Benzoyl peroxide:** "It kills the acne-causing bacteria, *P. acnes*, that lives within our hair follicles, and it also helps to break up and remove dead skin cells that clog our pores," explains Rodney. That makes the acid especially helpful for angry papules—it technically *can* help with comedonal acne (like we mentioned above), but it's mainly hailed for shrinking inflammatory pimples.
- **Tea tree oil:** [Tea tree oil](#) has antimicrobial properties and is capable of lowering levels of acne-causing bacteria on the skin when applied to acne lesions. In fact, one double-blind placebo-controlled study found that a 5% tea tree oil gel blend was an effective [treatment for mild to moderate acne](#). Plus, tea tree oil is also anti-inflammatory, which means it has the ability to "soothe and relieve irritated, itchy, red, swollen skin," says board-certified dermatologist [Marina Peredo, M.D.](#), about [the ingredient](#). Just make sure to always dilute the potent essential oil with a carrier—you never want to apply it directly to the skin.

## Summary

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You may fare well with a mix of acne-fighting *and* anti-inflammatory ingredients, like aloe vera and tea tree oil. Benzoyl peroxide also kills acne-causing bacteria, which is what causes papules to become red and inflamed.

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## Pustules

Again, papules often turn into pustules: When the red papule forms a white, pus-filled head, you now have a tender pustule. People often mistake this white head as, well, a "whitehead," but in clinical derm-speak, those are two very different things. It might feel tempting to squeeze the pimple as soon as you see this head forming, but do try to hold off. Self-surgery is not a good idea—best to see a professional for extractions.

### How to treat it:

- **Ice:** Pustules are pretty swollen, inflamed mounds. And how can we bring down swelling? Ice! Not only does the cool temperature feel nice on an angry zit, but it also constricts the circulation, limiting flow to the area and retracting the inflammation.
- **Spot treat:** If you have a spot treatment, serum, or mask, that features acne-fighting ingredients (salicylic acid, tea tree oil, benzoyl peroxide, witch hazel, etc.), you can always tap it onto the blemish before bed. It's a great tip to shrink pimples overnight, as the extra dose can help unclog the breakout.
- **Use an acne patch:** [Acne patches](#) are made of hydrocolloid, a medical dressing that absorbs excess fluid (like oil and pus) without drying out the skin. They're especially helpful on pustules, as the patch can suck out all the gunk without ripping the skin (which can lead to scars). Not to mention, the small rounds keep you from picking at your skin and causing more damage.

## Summary

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Ice is great for dialing down the inflammation, which can shrink the pimple in size. Then you can always use your favorite acne-fighting ingredient as a spot treatment—or rely on an acne patch to suck out all the gunk overnight.

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## Nodules.

"Nodular acne is one of the most severe forms of acne, along with cystic," says board-certified dermatologist Dendy Engelman, M.D., FAAD. Although, she adds that nodules are firmer than cysts and are also more widespread than typical pimples. Cosmetic and general dermatologist at Marmur Medical Rachel Maiman, M.D., says this type of acne, "often feels like firm knots under the skin and can be found on the face and body."

In terms of appearance, nodules look like hard lesions that feel like lumps under the skin; and while they may be flesh-toned or red, they're often pretty painful to the touch.

### How to treat it:

- **See a dermatologist:** Says Maiman, OTC acne treatments simply aren't effective against nodules. "Your dermatologist will know which medications to prescribe or recommend to treat and prevent any additional lesions from forming," she explains. "This is usually prescription topicals."
- **Get regular peels:** There may be a genetic component to nodular acne; that said, if you have a family history, regular, in-office peels can help remove excess dead skin and trigger cell turnover—which, in turn, can help prevent clogged pores and nodules with time.
- **Look for brightening ingredients:** Nodules have a higher risk of scarring. If you notice some scarring or hyperpigmentation, brightening ingredients (think vitamin C or [arbutin](#)) can help fade those marks over time.

## Summary

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**Nodular acne requires a trip to the dermatologist, and there's really no way around it. Although, you can opt for regular in-office peels to prevent clogged pores and brightening ingredients to fade scars.**

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## Cysts

Cystic acne is characterized by inflamed lesions, often large in size, that form deep within the skin—but unlike other forms of acne, they never come to a head on the surface. And unlike hard nodules, cysts can be soft to the touch (in fact, they're often puffy and tender).

### How to treat it:

- **Chamomile:** This botanical has been an age-old remedy for [treating wounds and skin irritations](#) in traditional medicine, and its anti-inflammatory properties may help dial down the painful swelling. "When used in topical skin care products, chamomile can help calm and soothe the skin," board-certified dermatologist [Joyce Park, M.D., tells mbg](#).
- **Retinol:** We've already discussed retinol's ability to prevent pesky breakouts, but it can also help decrease [acne scarring](#) as well (and because the inflammation is so deep, cysts are more prone to scarring). In addition to exfoliating dead skin cells, retinoid [blocks the activity of enzymes](#) behind melanin synthesis, resulting in a more even skin tone.
- **See a dermatologist:** While at-home methods can help, they shouldn't be your only plan of action. At the end of the day, cystic acne should always be treated by a dermatologist, and the very worst thing you can do for cystic breakouts is to touch, squeeze, or try to pop the lesions.

## Summary

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**Chamomile can soothe inflammation in the meantime, and retinol can help decrease scarring. Still, seeing a dermatologist is your best bet.**

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### The takeaway.

Acne is a complex skin condition with several triggers and contributing factors—so you can't expect to treat each spot the same way. Some ingredients are better suited than others for each type of acne, which is why classifying your blemishes is a solid place to start.

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