

Skin

How I Got Rid of Adult Cystic Acne That Popped Up Out of Nowhere



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Yahoo Beauty June 22, 2017



I had the good fortune of sailing through high school with only the occasional breakout — nothing that a dab of over-the-counter benzoyl peroxide couldn't fix in a couple of days.

With my teens and 20s far behind me, I figured that any pimples I'd get would continue to be a once-in-a-while occurrence. I thought my skin and I were basically in the clear.

I was dead wrong.

Last year, I stopped taking my birth control pills, and a short time after that, I noticed a painful and angry red bump under my skin. It wasn't like other pimples I'd had before — it was bigger and never came to a head, so there was nothing to "pop." I put my usual benzoyl peroxide on it, but it not only didn't get any better, it got worse — growing redder and angrier by the day, like I'd just managed to tick it off even further. The drugstore medicine wasn't touching it.

So I did what any beauty editor does — I made a beeline for my dermatologist, who confirmed that I had adult cystic acne. At a point in my life when my skin care regimen was focused on two main things — sun protection and fighting fine lines — acne, let alone cystic acne, wasn't exactly on my radar.

Turns out I'm far from alone in the acne-out-of-nowhere category. "Adult female acne is traditionally defined as acne developing in women above the age of 25," Joshua Zeichner, MD, the founder of Zeichner Dermatology and director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, tells Yahoo Beauty. "However, unfortunately, it is not uncommon for it to show up for the first time even in your 30s or 40s."

The causes of cystic acne

So what causes cystic acne to rear its ugly head? "There are many causes for cystic acne in adults," Kristina Goldenberg, who is one-half of the husband-and-wife duo at Goldenberg Dermatology in New York, tells Yahoo Beauty. "These include hormonal changes, diet, stress, use of [certain] makeup or skin care products, and, of course, genetics."

Regular pimples and cystic acne share the same common causes. "Acne is caused by a combination of oil production that clogs pores, sticky skin cells within follicles that lead to blockages, acne-causing bacteria, and inflammation," explains Zeichner. "The same factors lead to all types of pimples, but in some more severe cases, patients develop deep, painful cysts."

More than likely, my going off oral contraceptives — and the hormones fluctuations that ensued — was the source of my skin woes. "Pregnancy, breastfeeding, starting or stopping birth control pills, or getting an IUD can all lead to changes in hormone levels that lead to acne," says Goldenberg. "Being a woman by definition means our hormones are going up and down every cycle. Oral contraceptives help minimize these fluctuations in hormone levels. In fact, dermatologists often use oral contraceptives as a treatment modality for acne. When you stopped your oral contraceptives, hormonal fluctuations resumed — stimulating an increase in oil production — and gave rise to acne."

And let's be honest, as a full-time working mom of twins, I'm no stranger to stress and not getting enough sleep, which doesn't do my skin any favors. "There is a good body of data showing a relationship between stress and acne," Zeichner says. "For example, students have been shown to break out during testing periods in school."

What you eat can also influence how your skin is behaving. "I advise all my patients to either stop dairy altogether or only consume organic dairy products," Gary Goldenberg, MD, of Goldenberg Dermatology, tells Yahoo Beauty, noting that dairy can cause inflammation. However, Zeichner notes that yogurt and cheese have not been associated with breakouts. Goldenberg adds: "Meat and poultry should be antibiotic- and hormone-free. I also recommend a daily probiotic and ask patients to consume more anti-inflammatory foods."

Goldenberg also recommends showering immediately after working out to remove the sweat that can clog pores, as well as keeping pillowcases clean, avoiding too much alcohol, and getting stress levels under control (which is easier said than done).

Acne-fighting treatments that work

Topical medications are typically the first line of defense against acne. And because acne has multiple causes, it's common for derms to put you on more than one medication. At first, my dermatologist prescribed two topical creams: adapalene (0.3 percent), which is a retinoid that exfoliates dead skin cells and prevents clogged pores that can lead to breakouts, and a topical anti-inflammatory, Aczone. I used both, in layers, twice a day, religiously.