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Is Popping Your Pimples Really That Bad?

Your skin is begging you to read this.



There's nothing like popping a pimple. If a blemish is rude enough to show up on your face, your fingers probably itch to have a go at it—even though you've likely heard that you shouldn't pop your zits. But it's *right there*, and waiting to let nature run its course isn't a satisfying alternative.

Even dermatologists get it: Popping a pimple is “so gratifying,” New York City dermatologist Doris Day, M.D., author of *100 Questions and Answers About Acne* and the upcoming book *Beyond Beautiful*, tells SELF.

While you may have heard a blanket recommendation not to pop your pimples, that’s just not realistic when it’s 1:00 A.M. and you’re staring at a zit through your magnifying mirror. Luckily, ignoring this advice doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to wind up doing your skin damage.

“Popping a pimple can be a good thing or a really bad thing—it all depends on the pimple and how you pop it,” Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of Dr. Bailey Skin Care, tells SELF. Here’s when you can give yourself pimple-popping permission and when you should practice the art of self-control.

For starters, here’s an important thing to know: Not every pimple is the same.

In general, zits can be broken into a few different categories: blackheads and whiteheads, papules and pustules, and nodules and cysts, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). They all start when your pores get clogged, but beyond that, they exhibit a few key differences.

A blackhead or whitehead can form when oil, dead skin cells, and bacteria plug up one of your pores, according to the AAD. If the pore remains open, this plug can darken when the bacteria and oil get exposed to air, hence the term blackhead. If it closes up, it looks white, and you can probably guess what that’s called.

If the skin involved gets irritated at all, your blackhead or whitehead can become a papule, which is a hard, reddened bump that looks like a classic zit. If bacteria infects the papule, pus can form as part of your immune system’s attempt to fight the infection, and you’ll get a pustule for your body’s troubles. (Though pustules have a white or yellow head, they’re bigger than whiteheads, so that’s how you can tell the difference.)

Then there are cysts and nodules, which happens if a blocked, irritated pore overachieves by becoming bigger, going deeper into your skin, and causing you pain. While cysts are hard and nodules are soft, they can both make people feel self-conscious and are hard to treat, the AAD notes.

Whether you’re OK to deal with a zit on your own ultimately depends on the type you’re dealing with.

In general, you’re fine to try to (gently!) squeeze out a blackhead’s contents because it’s already open to the surface, Dr. Day says. Popping a whitehead can also be OK if the whitehead is right at the surface, not lying underneath the skin, Dr. Bailey says. The latter means you’d have to really force your skin open to expel its contents, which can create a portal for infection-causing bacteria to enter. Basically, if you have to work really hard for it, you probably shouldn’t be messing with it.

Papules are a hands-off kind of situation, both since you’d have to work hard to break these hard red bumps open, and also since there’s a lot of inflammation going on under the skin. “If you try to squeeze that, you could make it worse, leading to more redness and swelling,” Dr. Day says. Also, you probably won’t get much out of a papule, if anything.

You might be able to get a little bit of pus out of a pustule that's either oozing or has a white or yellow head ready to go, but you'll need to rein yourself in. "If you get anything out, clean [the pustule] and then back away," Dr. Day says. You may feel the urge to really squeeze it even after all the pus is out, but that can damage your skin. While gentle pressure to get pus on the surface out is fine, forceful pressure isn't.

Trying to pop cysts and nodules is a no-go, Dr. Day says. Since these are bigger, deeper, and harder to treat, popping them on your own isn't going to get rid of them (and will probably just hurt).

The way you pop a zit matters, too.

You're just asking for trouble if you try to pop a pimple with dirty tools like tweezers or unwashed hands, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells SELF. Mixing an open wound with bacteria boosts your risk of scarring and infection.

If you have a blackhead or firm whitehead, it's best to use a comedone extractor, which is a handled device with a hollow circle at the end that's specially designed to help you extract matter from these kinds of pimples, Dr. Goldenberg says. (But again, don't use a comedone extractor if your zit isn't ready, and don't put too much pressure on your skin.) To use a comedone extractor, first clean your skin however you typically do, then use the extractor to try to empty the contents of the zit. Applying a hot washcloth for a few minutes or taking a hot shower beforehand can help soften your skin and make extraction easier, Dr. Day says.

If you're dealing with a pustule, it's OK to use your fingers, provided they're clean and you don't use your nails (they can scratch the skin, creating an opening for bacteria to get in and cause infection), Dr. Day says. Better yet, after you wash your hands, gently press the skin around the pustule with a tissue so your fingers still aren't coming into contact with the area.

No matter how you pop a pimple, afterwards you should apply a small amount of antibiotic cream on the area to avoid infection, Dr. Bailey says.

If you're nervous to tackle a zit on your own, or just want some backup, see your dermatologist.

"Dermatologists [handle pimples] daily," Dr. Goldenberg says. Your doctor can pop the pimple for you, but they can also give antibiotics (oral or topical) if it's infected, determine why you got the zit in the first place and how to prevent more from cropping up, and figure out if more are forming near it, Dr. Day says.

If you're dealing with a cyst or nodule, your doctor may choose to inject the pimple with a steroid like cortisone, which will cause it to deflate and become less painful. "Cortisone is like a magic wand when it comes to shrinking giant acne [bumps]," Dr. Bailey says.

While you may be fine to deal with zits on your own, don't be afraid to call for backup if this is becoming a regular issue—your doctor can do a lot to help.