

A Guide for Acne Medications

I have customized a combination of prescription and non-prescription medications that will help to improve your complexion—provided that you consistently comply with my program and don't consider these as “spot” treatments. In general, acne medications take about a month to show initial effects. Should side effects occur, it is imperative that you call my office so that we can prevent any serious problems. If you become pregnant, discontinue your medications and contact us for safety instructions. These are guidelines only and are not meant to replace scheduled appointments in which I may be able to adjust a regimen tailored for you.

Oral antibiotics

Tetracycline, Doxycycline, Minocycline, Trimethoprim / Sulfamethoxazole, Erythromycin

Systemic antibiotics target both the bacteria (*propionibacterium Acnes*) and the inflammation that it elicits to reduce the amount of deep acne (“pimples”, “zits”) that you develop. It is generally safe to take these oral antibiotics for several months continuously, but the low risk of bacterial resistance is possible. I usually start these medications with a goal to taper to a much lower (sub-antimicrobial) dose or to discontinue altogether once your acne is well controlled. Side effects may consist of heartburn, nausea, dizziness, headaches, sun sensitivity, predisposition to yeast colonization, and allergic hives. One may consider taking them with food to buffer from GI side effects, although dairy products may bind to the medication, reducing its potency.

Topical antibiotics

Clindamycin, Sodium Sulfacetamide & Sulfur, Benzoyl Peroxide, Azelaic acid

These surface antibiotics help with mild cases of inflammatory acne described above, but are often prescribed in combination with the oral versions for synergy and long-term maintenance. Benefits also include risk reduction for bacterial resistance when combined with oral antibiotics. Side effects, while uncommon, include dryness, irritation, and allergic rashes. Reducing to smaller amounts and lower frequencies combined with a neutral moisturizer often eliminates this problem. It should be noted that benzoyl peroxide may bleach colored fabrics, so rinse the cleansers off well and consider using white linens.

Topical Retinoids and Salicylic Acid

Adapalene gel, Tretinoin, Tazarotene

Retinoids are cousins of vitamin A designed to target both deep inflammatory acne and surface, comedonal acne (“blackheads”, “whiteheads”) by gradually opening up the narrow, clogged pores. Salicylic acid comes in the form of cleansers and gels to dissolve the plugs, acting synergistically with retinoids. Side effects are sun sensitivity, dryness, and irritation. A chemical peel may ensue if overzealous applications of retinoids are used. You are advised to gradually acclimatize your skin to the benefits of retinoids over 4 to 6 weeks. A pea-sized amount is sufficient for the entire face and should be applied with dots placed symmetrically over the forehead, temples, cheeks, nose, jaw line, and chin before rubbing gently into the skin. Moisturizers may be immediately applied to reduce irritation. Start by applying the preparation two nights a week and gradually increase to every other night. You should be able to use this medication every night within 2 months. While it may initially appear that your complexion is worsening, the long term benefits will become apparent within 2 to 6 months.

Moisturizers

Cetaphil, CeraVe, Neutrogena, Purpose, Dove, Oil of Olay, Clinique, DML, others

While I do not endorse any one product over another, the above-branded moisturizers are affordable and are neutral in pH. Used immediately after applications of topical acne preparations will significantly reduce irritation. Should you have questions regarding an unlisted product, look for terms such as “oil-free”, “water-based”, or “non-comedogenic” as a guide. Of course, if you don't suffer from any dryness or irritation, there is no need to use a moisturizer—simplicity is the name of the game!

Isotretinoin, Oral contraceptives

These two types of medications, while being safe and effective, are not first-line treatments for acne and require a consultation to discuss their risks and benefits. They are outside of the scope of this guide.

- Dr. Chris Ha, MD