

Why Is It So Bad to Pop a Pimple?

BY ERICA SWEENEY | APRIL 25, 2024



It's tough to resist squeezing a juicy pimple. You probably want to get rid of it quickly and may feel like you know exactly how to do it after having watched hundreds of pimple-popping videos online. Dermatologists get the temptation, but say you should leave your zits alone.

“As a general rule, you shouldn't pop your pimples,” says **Dr. Jody Alpert Levine**, a dermatologist and director of dermatology at Plastic Surgery & Dermatology of NYC.

Pimples form when excess oil, bacteria, and dirt clog hair follicles. When the trapped follicles stay beneath the skin and form a white bump, they're referred to as whiteheads. Blackheads are plugged follicles that reach the skin's surface and open up; exposure to air turns their contents black.

Whatever color they are, squeezing, popping, or picking at pimples to release the gunk clogging the pore can disrupt the healing process and cause a host of problems, from scarring to infections, **Dr. Levine** says.

Still, she recognizes that people do pop their pimples from time to time. While it's best to treat acne under the guidance of a dermatologist, **Dr. Levine** says she often teaches her patients the proper technique for extracting blemishes.

Popping painful, unsightly spots may not seem like a big deal. Dermatologists explain the risks, some tips for getting rid of zits, and what to do if acne is a persistent problem.

The risks of popping a zit

Squeezing pimples traumatizes the skin around them, says Dr. Paul Curtiss, a dermatologist with U.S. Dermatology Partners in Carrollton, Texas. This can lead to long-term scarring, inflammation, infections, and more painful and noticeable acne, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. He says it can also lead to inflammatory hyperpigmentation, or dark marks on the skin.

When you pop a pimple, you might inadvertently push bacteria and debris deeper into your pores, worsening acne. The oil and other gunk could also spread, causing more pimples to appear in other areas, says Dr. Annette LaCasse, a dermatologist in Commerce Township, Mich.

“Pushing toward the center of the pimple can often cause the pus beneath the skin to spread further away from the pimple, causing a larger pimple and more inflammation,” says **Dr. Levine**.

Plus, bacteria or other germs on your hands can be transferred to the blemish, potentially leading to an infection, the AAD says.

“I know people want to get rid of a pimple as soon as they see it, but they have to understand there are consequences to that immediate relief,” LaCasse adds.

The best way to get rid of pimples

Covering blemishes with concealer can help disguise them. But seeing a dermatologist is the safest way to extract pimples, **Dr. Levine** says.

Doctors can use sterile instruments to remove blackheads and whiteheads without scarring or inflammation, according to the AAD. They also may inject the bump with a corticosteroid, which helps it heal quickly and minimizes scarring. Another option is an incision and drainage procedure, where they cut open the spot and remove the debris (think: all those doctor’s office pimple-popping videos).

As an at-home option, try pimple patches. These are small stickers that you apply to your zits that contain hydrocolloid gel, a wound-healing substance, according to the Cleveland Clinic. You can also dab products containing benzoyl peroxide, glycolic acid, or salicylic acid on the spots. Curtiss says these items often help pimples dry up and go away a little more quickly than they would on their own.

While dermatologists advise against removing blemishes yourself, they recognize that people are likely going to do it. So knowing the proper technique can help you minimize problems, **Dr. Levine** says.

If you must pop a pimple, wash your hands and face first, and then apply ice to reduce pain and inflammation. Wait until the bump forms a whitehead, meaning the pus is near the surface, she adds. “The proper way to pop a pimple involves equal, gentle pressure around the pimple and a slight outward pressure. If no pus comes out with gentle pressure of that nature, then stop trying.”

You can use the same technique for squeezing blackheads, **Dr. Levine** adds.

Why it’s more effective to treat acne—not burst it

If you frequently have zits that you want to pop, Curtiss suggests treating your acne issue overall. A dermatologist can help you create a plan.

Many people can treat acne at home with over-the-counter products. Using a face wash with benzoyl peroxide and applying the retinoid adapalene can help clear up acne, according to AAD. Products with salicylic acid can unclog pores and exfoliate the skin, preventing acne, and azelaic acid can minimize acne-related dark spots.

If you have acne-prone skin, **Dr. Levine** suggests using oil-free and non-comedogenic skincare products, which won’t clog pores.

See a dermatologist if you’ve tried at-home acne treatments with no improvement for four to six weeks, she says.

Doctors will determine what’s causing acne and prescribe the most appropriate treatments, which might include topical and oral retinoids or antibiotics. They might also recommend chemical peels or laser therapy.

“My goal for my patients is always to get and keep their skin 100% clear,” Curtiss says. “The best treatments are those that are able to prevent pimples from forming in the first place.”