SYMPTOM

Whiteheads

Whiteheads are small, closed bumps that form when oil and dead skin block a pore.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Small, firm, pale bumps, usually without pain

WHERE IT IS FELT
Face, chest, shoulders, or upper back

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Blocked pores, oily skin, hormonal changes

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Fever with rapidly spreading redness, warmth, or swelling

USUALLY LASTS
Weeks to months, based on blockage and treatment

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, painful, scarring, or distressing despite gentle self-care

Overview

Whiteheads are small bumps caused by blocked pores. Their medical name is closed comedones . A pore becomes blocked by skin oil, called sebum, and dead skin cells. Because the pore remains closed, the material inside looks white or skin-coloured.

Whiteheads often occur as part of acne, but having one or two bumps does not necessarily mean you have an acne disorder. They are not caused by poor hygiene, and the pale centre is usually trapped oil and skin cells rather than pus.

They can occur at any age. Hormonal changes make them especially common during puberty, around menstrual periods, during pregnancy, or after changing certain medicines.

What it may feel or look like

A whitehead usually looks like a small, round, raised bump. It may be white, cream, or the same colour as the surrounding skin. Most are not painful, although the area may feel slightly tender if it becomes inflamed.

Whiteheads commonly appear on the forehead, nose, cheeks, and chin. They may also develop

on the chest, shoulders, or upper back, where there are many oil-producing glands.

Other bumps can look similar. Milia are tiny, firm cysts filled with keratin, a skin protein. They often occur around the eyes and do not have an open pore. Folliculitis, which is inflammation around a hair follicle, is more likely to be itchy, red, or pus-filled. A clinician can help if the type of bump is unclear.

Common causes

The usual cause is a combination of excess skin oil and dead cells collecting inside a pore. Hormones can increase oil production, while the lining of the pore may shed cells in a way that makes blockage more likely.

Factors that can contribute include:

Some medicines can trigger acne-like breakouts, including certain corticosteroids like prednisone or hydrocortisone , lithium, and hormone treatments. Do not stop a prescribed medicine on your own. Ask the prescriber whether it could be contributing and whether alternatives are appropriate.

Sudden crops of identical, itchy bumps may have another cause, such as folliculitis. Deep, painful lumps are also different from simple whiteheads and may need a medical assessment.

- Naturally oily or acne-prone skin
- Puberty, menstrual cycles, pregnancy, or other hormonal changes
- Oily cosmetics, hair products, sunscreens, or skin products
- Friction or pressure from helmets, masks, tight clothing, or equipment
- Heavy sweating, especially when trapped beneath clothing

When to seek medical care

Whiteheads by themselves are not usually urgent. Book a routine appointment if they are widespread, keep returning, leave dark marks or scars, or have not improved after several weeks of consistent self-care. It is also reasonable to seek help sooner if they affect your confidence or emotional well-being.

Arrange same-day medical care if an area becomes rapidly more red, warm, swollen, or painful, especially if you also develop a fever. These signs may point to a skin infection rather than an uncomplicated whitehead. Swelling close to an eye, eye pain, or changes in vision also need

prompt assessment.

Call emergency services if a skin product is followed by trouble breathing, faintness, or swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat. These can be signs of a serious allergic reaction.

How the cause is found

A doctor or dermatologist can usually identify whiteheads by looking at your skin. They may ask when the bumps began, where they occur, and whether they itch, hurt, or change with your menstrual cycle.

Mention any prescription medicines, supplements, cosmetics, hair products, or oily products used on the affected area. It can also help to explain what treatments you have tried and whether they caused dryness or irritation.

Blood tests, skin swabs, and scans are not usually needed for straightforward whiteheads. Further testing may be considered if the bumps do not look typical or if there are other signs of a hormonal condition.

Treatment and self-care

Wash affected skin gently, usually no more than twice daily and after heavy sweating. Use lukewarm water and a mild cleanser. Scrubbing, abrasive tools, and frequent washing can irritate the skin without clearing the blockage.

Choose moisturisers, makeup, and sunscreen labelled non-comedogenic , meaning they are designed not to block pores. Keep oily hair products away from acne-prone skin when possible.

Non-prescription acne products may contain salicylic acid, benzoyl peroxide, or adapalene. Salicylic acid helps loosen material blocking the pore. Adapalene is a topical retinoid that helps prevent new blockages. Benzoyl peroxide is especially useful when red or inflamed spots are also present.

Follow the product label and introduce one product at a time. Dryness, peeling, or stinging can occur, particularly at first. A pharmacist can help you choose a suitable option. Avoid topical retinoids, including adapalene, during pregnancy or while planning pregnancy unless a clinician has advised otherwise.

Do not squeeze or pierce whiteheads. This can push material deeper into the skin and increase inflammation, dark marks, infection, or scarring. A dermatologist can perform comedone extraction safely when appropriate.

Prescription treatment may be offered when non-prescription care is not enough or when acne is extensive or scarring.

What to expect

A single whitehead may remain for several weeks, while new ones can appear as older ones clear. Treatment does not work overnight because it must prevent fresh blockages as well as clear existing ones.

Visible improvement often takes several weeks of consistent care. Skin may become mildly dry before it improves, but marked burning, swelling, blistering, or a worsening rash is not expected. Stop the new product and seek advice if this happens.

Whiteheads do not usually scar unless they become inflamed or are repeatedly picked. Flat red or brown marks can remain after a spot settles, particularly in darker skin tones, but these are not the same as permanent scars.

Common questions

Are whiteheads caused by dirty skin?

No. They form below the skin surface when oil and dead cells block a pore. Harsh washing does not prevent them and may make irritation worse.

Should I pop a whitehead?

It is better not to. Squeezing may rupture the pore beneath the skin, leading to inflammation, infection, dark marks, or scarring.

Why do I keep getting them in the same area?

That area may produce more oil or have repeated contact with cosmetics, hair products, masks, clothing, or equipment. Hormonal changes can also cause recurring breakouts.

Are whiteheads contagious?

No. You cannot catch them from another person or spread them by touching them. However, touching and picking can irritate your own skin.

Can diet cause whiteheads?

Diet may influence acne in some people, but whiteheads rarely have one simple food trigger. Avoid highly restrictive diets without professional advice. Keeping a record may help if you notice a consistent pattern.

Sources

- American Academy of Dermatology Association. Acne clinical guideline
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Acne vulgaris: management, guideline NG198
- DermNet. Comedonal acne
- NHS. Acne
- US Food and Drug Administration. Rare but serious hypersensitivity reactions with certain over-the-counter topical acne products