

Investigating acne, and artificial tanning

Learn more, live better. A Canadian dermatologist answers your questions.



Q When is acne bad enough that I should ask my doctor to send me to a dermatologist?

A A referral to a dermatologist might be warranted to treat your acne in any of the following situations:

1. You are not sure of your diagnosis.
2. Your acne is worsening despite current treatment.
3. You are extremely upset about your acne.

A dermatologist is a physician specialist who has received the highest level of training with regard to the skin. He or she will have a thorough knowledge of the skin's structure and function, as well as experience of and access to various safe and effective treatment options, and may be able to get you started more quickly on a treatment that is targeted to your specific needs.

We are living in a very fortunate time; there are now extensive options to control the elemental factors that promote acne. For example, topical antibacterial agents such as clindamycin and benzoyl peroxide can reduce inflammation, while retinoids can reduce the formation of whiteheads and blackheads. Pills such as oral antibiotics can reduce widespread inflammation, while certain birth control pills and


other anti-androgen agents can mediate the hormonal influence on acne. For over 30 years, oral medications derived from vitamin A have been very effective for more severe cases. As a quick fix for acne lesions, cortisone injections, extractions, chemical peels and microdermabrasion may also be helpful. As well, a number of laser and light treatments exist to reduce oil production and bacterial load, and treat acne scarring. Treatment options are available that can not only improve your skin, but also help you deal with the feelings of frustration and sadness that can come along with acne. Your dermatologist has the knowledge and experience to choose the most effective and safe protocol for you.

Q Are tanning creams or spray tans safe?

A In contrast to tanning beds, tanning products do not utilize UV light to darken the skin. In fact, after using these products, the skin is not biologically darkened, but simply painted. This makes sunless tanning products a safer option compared to using tanning beds or sunbathing.

The active ingredient in most sunless tanning creams and lotions,

dihydroxyacetone (DHA), reacts with the proteins in the outer dead layer of the skin to produce a tanned appearance. While DHA is safe for the skin, contact with the eyes may cause irritation, and the risk of inhaled or ingested DHA is not known. In particular, high-exposure inhaled spray tans may have an associated risk of lung injury. When spray tanning, you should wear eye goggles and nose plugs to minimize your exposure. Furthermore, be wary of similarly named products such as 'sun enhancers,' 'tan accelerators' or 'sun amplifiers.' These products contain chemicals that enhance UV exposure to the skin, increasing the risk of skin cancer.

Since tanning creams and sprays often do not contain sunscreen, remember that you should also apply proper sun protection when going outside. 

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If you would like to have your questions answered by our CSPA medical advisors, please contact us at: Canadian Skin Patient Alliance, 136-2446 Bank Street, Suite 383, Ottawa, Ontario K1V 1A8 or www.canadianskin.ca or check us out on Facebook and Twitter. 