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Ask a Dermatologist: How to Properly Pop a Pimple

By: Kristin Howard | December 13 2019



It's pretty common knowledge that popping pimples is a bad idea. After all, picking or extracting your own acne can lead to skin damage, like scarring, and may even result in more acne through the spread of bacteria. In an ideal world, everyone allows the life cycle of their acne to work itself out until those symptoms die a natural death, but the truth is, some people do pop their pimples, and who are we to judge? While we can't be there in the bathroom with you to talk you out of popping that pimple into oblivion if you're about to do so anyway, we *can* offer professional tips on how to pop a pimple as safely, effectively, and hygienically as possible.

Ahead, we spoke with two dermatologists to learn the best way to pop a pimple, along with a few tips for reducing acne symptoms. While neither of them would exactly recommend that people take pimple popping matters into their own hands without seeing a pro first, they do insist that three major factors should be considered if you're gonna do it yourself: Hygiene, pressure, and the type of pimple you're trying to eliminate.

MEET THE EXPERT

- Dr. Joshua Zeichner, M.D. is a dermatologist, as well as the Director of Cosmetic and Clinical Research in Dermatology at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.
- **Dr. Anna Guanche** is a board-certified, award-winning dermatologist and dermatologic surgeon. She is also the founder of Bella Skin Institute in Calabasas, California.

Step 1: Sanitize

And we mean everything—your skin, your hands, any tools you may use, the towel you clean up with, the sink you're resting any of this stuff on... if it's going to come into contact with your newly extracted and broken skin, it needs to be bacteria-free to reduce the risk of more damage, just like the pros would do it. "When a dermatologist performs acne surgery, the technical term for pimple popping, there is a lot of prep and care that is taken in regard to the skin," explains Director of Cosmetic and Clinical Research in Dermatology at the Mount Sinai Hospital in NYC, Dr. Joshua Zeichner, M.D. "First, your doctor will clean their hands and apply surgical gloves. All makeup is removed from your face, then the entire area is thoroughly cleansed using rubbing alcohol."

Step 2: Soften Your Skin With Mild Heat

In order to extract a pimple safely and with as much ease as your skin will allow, it's important that you treat your pores like the precious little pathways between your sebaceous glands and your complexion that they are. Acne symptoms, like pimples, occur when bacteria forms inside of a pore thanks to a combination of sebum (oil) and debris, like dead skin cells. One way to make extracting a pimple easier is to soften the surface of the skin using mild heat. "Wash your hands, and take a warm shower and let the steam open the pores," says board-certified dermatologist Dr. Anna Guanche. You can also use a facial steamer like this option from Dr. Dennis Gross. In addition to washing your hands, Dr. Zeichner adds that you should trim your nails short if possible, to reduce skin breakage, and advises that people "do not pick your face at night before bed when you are tired," which could result in a rushed job.

Step 3: Open and Extract

Once you and your skin are clean, and your pores are soft and opened up, it's time to extract, which should be done with time, care, and lots of patience. "Take a soft cloth around the fingers or a small piece of tissue and gently press downward on each side of the pimple," says Dr. Guanche. The key trick here is to push downward onto the pimple, much like how the pros would do it, and not from the bottom so that it creates a break in your skin and gushes out. "With gentle pressure, a professional would press downward instead of centrally to extract the pimple, causing the least amount of trauma possible," she adds.

In a professional setting, dermatologists will often encourage an extraction with a surgical tool, which results in minimal damage to the skin. "A trained professional would then use something like a sterile sharp "pointed tip" blade or lancet to unroof the top of the pimple without damaging the surrounding tissue. A small sterile needle could also be used to gently unroof the top of the pimple," Dr. Guanche says. "If there is a clear white head, it would be ok to gently unroof the top of the pimple and use gentle pressure to extract it." It's important to remember that unroofing should only occur on pimples clearly containing puss, and that this should only be done if you have professional, sterile equipment on hand. However you choose to extract, Dr. Zeichner adds that less is usually more. "Do not apply so much pressure to the skin that it

results in breakage or damage to the skin barrier,” he states. “You do not want to create and open sore or wound.”

Pimple poppers who don't want to use their fingers to pop pimples have also found success with tools like Dermapore when it comes to at-home extractions.

Step 4: Know When to Stop

A pimple that is ready to be popped will allow itself to be pushed out of a clogged pore with some gentle coaxing, but if you're being met with resistance, it's best to listen to your skin and wait a little longer before trying again. “If the pimple doesn't erupt with that technique, *leave it alone*—no need to try to squeeze at every angle,” Dr. Guanche explains. “This could lead to a backwards eruption. When keratin erupts from the pimple back into the skin, the skin mounts a huge response to it causing inflammation and the dreaded volcano eruption.” If your pimple isn't ready to be popped and you simply can't resist picking at it, try nipping your habit in the bud with hydrocolloid patches, like these from Peace Out Skincare. They contain salicylic acid to treat your pimples while simultaneously preventing premature popping—try saying that three times fast.

Sometimes, it's wise not to try to pop at all, especially if you have specific types of acne symptoms like cysts or nodules. “Not all pimples are poppable, such as any red, angry bumps or nodules under the skin,” says Dr. Zeichner. “These large nodules and cysts are like balloons under the surface of the skin. They are filled with oil and when their wall ruptures, it leads to inflammation.” In fact, attempting to pop a cyst will not only lead to further irritation, it won't even rid your skin of the issue, because cysts rest so far below the surface. “These cysts are not connected to the surface of the skin so attempting to pick them leads to more harm than good,” he adds.

Dr. Guanche also warns that people should be very careful when dealing with these deep symptoms, as what you think is a cyst may not even be acne. “A cyst with no obvious opening may not be a cyst at all. If a pimple has a red ring around it and is very painful, you should seek medical attention,” she explains. “Cortisone injections and sometimes even oral antibiotics may be necessary.”

Finally, Prevent New Acne from Forming

If popping a pimple sounds like it may not work for you or your skin type, or if you just aren't looking to deal with acne as often, there are measures you can take to either reduce the size and appearance of acne symptoms, or send them retreating back where they came from. The best place to start—prevention.

“With acne, we know that all of those pipes are somewhat clogged, we just cannot predict which one will be fully clogged causing a pimple, and for this reason, we recommend treating the whole face with acne medicines,” says Dr. Zeichner. “The idea is to treat pimples you

already have and prevent new ones from developing. Topical retinoids are a mainstay of treatment for acne. Think of them as pipe cleaners that keep the pores open and preventing blockages from developing. Your Dermatologist can prescribe one for you.” Some favorite acne treatment products Dr. Zeichner recommends include Altreno Lotion, which is a retinoid that contains tretinoin.

As far as over-the-counter options, products containing tried and true acne-fighting ingredients salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide are his go-to suggestions, which include Aveeno Clear Complexion Cleanser and Neutrogena Stubborn Acne Rapid Clear Daily Leave on Mask.

Clay or charcoal masks are also useful as they have calming and oil absorbing properties, and for those looking for a more natural treatment, tea tree oil may be a good option, as long as you apply it with care and a little caution. “Tea tree oil naturally has antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. It is commonly used to treat a variety of skin conditions including acne and dandruff,” Dr. Zeichner says. “While some people can tolerate direct application of tea tree oil to the skin, for those with sensitive skin, considered using a carrier oil like almond or coconut oil. If you develop redness, dryness, burning, or stinging, discontinue use.”

For anyone seriously struggling to rid their skin of chronic acne, a visit to a professional may help you target your issues to help you get the type of healthy skin you’ll feel most comfortable in. “A trip to your local dermatologist’s office is a great idea if you want to keep your skin from breaking out, that is step one,” suggests Dr. Guanche. From there, you and your doctor will be able to discuss your skin concerns to find a treatment plan that’s designed specifically for your face. “There are numerous prescription medications that could help during breakouts. Some are great as spot treatments. If you do notice a pimple starting to get big, you can mix a small amount of over-the-counter cortisone cream with a drop of Visine to take the red out and reduce inflammation.”

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