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Why Am I Getting Blackheads on My Cheeks? Here's How to Fix (and Prevent) Them

By: Maya Allen | 9 July 2018

Here's how it usually goes: Your skin is thriving and you feel like you've got it going on. Because who doesn't like glowing, smooth, and clear skin? Then, suddenly, a pesky blackhead decides to pop up. Even more annoying, maybe a few of them arrive at the same time (since they usually like to show up unannounced in batches). Blackheads normally like to plant a seat on your nose, but that doesn't mean they don't wander. If you're getting blackheads on your cheeks, you're not alone—it's a problem area that gathers a lot of dirt and debris over time and causes clogged pores which turn into blackheads.

They look and feel so deep, which is why it seems like there's no way to get rid of stubborn blackheads on cheeks, because they've pushed past the surface of your skin. However, you can. It takes a lot of skin discipline, like exfoliating and cleansing with products powerful enough to kiss them goodbye. This problem is not talked about enough, so we tapped several dermatologists to share exactly how to solve it. A thorough guide below.



Common Causes of Blackheads on Cheeks

"All pimples—whether blackheads, papules, or cysts—result from the plugging up of hair follicles on our skin," explains Kenneth Howe, MD, of Wexler Dermatology. "In normal acne-free skin, the cells lining the hair follicle shed off one by one and float to the surface on a thin film of oil put out

by the oil glands. In acne, this process gets disrupted. Instead of shedding freely, the dead skin cells of the follicle stick together, clumping up into plugs that then block the follicle."

"Blackheads are simply pimples in which the plug is close to the skin surface—so close, in fact, that the tip of the plug is exposed to air," says Howe. "This exposure leads to oxidation of the plug, which turns it dark—the same chemical process that makes a ripe banana turn brown."

If you're specifically wondering if there's a reason they're on your cheeks, Michael Wiederkehr, MD, contributing medical advisor for Zwivel.com, has an answer for you. "Blackheads on the cheeks, also called open comedones, can be specifically caused by sun damage and smoking as well as by the typical causes of blackheads which include excess sebum production, clogging of pores with oil from moisturizer or makeup," says Wiederkehr.

How to Get Rid of Blackheads on Cheeks

Ava Shamban, MD, of Beverly Hills, recommends two critical ingredients and a crucial step. "At-home topicals such as products containing salicylic acid or retinoids, or both, are the only ingredients that will really work," says Shamban. "The skin needs to be exfoliated well enough for the contents of the blackhead to be expelled before they even form."

Howe agrees with the importance of topical products that contain retinol. "The strongest and most effective treatment for the prevention of blackheads is tretinoin, or Retin-A," says Howe. "This prescription cream regulates the shedding of dead skin cells from the follicular walls, thus keeping blackheads from developing in the first place. Tretinoin is a bit irritating to some sensitive-skinned patients. These patients may do better with milder alternatives such as retinol."

Wiederkehr also believes in the importance of applying the topical creams mentioned above as well as some physical treatments. "Try extractions performed by a medical professional or licensed esthetician," says Wiederkehr. "If one is going to try removing blackheads on the cheeks at home, use two cotton-tip applicators (Q-tips) after lightly steaming the face."

Dermatologist-Recommended Products for Getting Rid of Blackheads on Cheeks



Epiduo Gel \$23

"My faves are tretinoin cream 0.025% or Epiduo gel," suggests Howe. "These prescription creams do the best job of preventing blackheads. They actually get into the follicle and get its cells to shed properly without forming plugs."



SkinBetter Science AlphaRet Overnight Cream \$110

"SkinBetter Science AlphaRet Overnight Cream is great OTC retinol cream," Howe continues. "It's designed as an anti-aging agent, but it can be used to fight acne as well. It's gentle and well-tolerated."

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