

Q I am a 20-year-old woman who suffers from irregular menstruation. I also suffer from severe acne. I wash my face regularly with a cleanser and I also use pimple cream. However, I am very picky about my diet and do not eat a lot of vegetables or fruit. What should I do?

A If you suffer from severe acne and there is evidence of scarring, it is advisable to see a dermatologist for optimum topical treatment and, if required, oral acne therapy.

Topical treatment normally includes using a non-greasy facial wash, non-greasy moisturiser (depending on your skin type) and a combination of topical benzyl peroxide and antibiotic solution with retinoid cream or gel.

This intensive topical regimen has to be carried out daily and will require

Acne and irregular menses

a diligent routine.

If your acne is affected by your menstruation – which, as you have mentioned, is irregular – oral contraceptive pills may be an option to help with both your menstrual cycle as well as your acne.

You may wish to consult a gynaecologist to seek further assessment and medical advice.

However, if your acne is extensive, or if topical treatments are not effective, oral antibiotics together with the topical regimen mentioned above may be recommended.

ANTIBIOTICS TO AVOID SCARS

Oral antibiotics, which are given at a low dosage, help to control acne inflammation and reduce the amount of bacteria on the skin.

The optimum results will not be evident until three months later, and if there are signs of improvement, the treatment can be continued for a much longer period.

The side effects of oral antibiotics are not always encountered, but some patients may experience an upset tummy, nausea and, sometimes, a rash after sun exposure. In rare cases, the liver may be affected.

However, for much more severe acne with cysts and scarring, oral isotretinoin may need to be introduced, which is much more potent and has a higher success rate.

This medication has to be carefully monitored by a dermatologist. Blood tests are required to ensure there are no side effects.

Side effects that are commonly encountered are dry skin and lips.

But the dosage can be altered, depending on the response and side effects.

The main reason for prescribing oral antibiotics or isotretinoin is to prevent permanent scarring, which can affect one's psycho-social life.

A healthy diet that includes fruit and vegetables is always important in the maintenance of healthy skin.

Unfortunately, for people with severe acne, a healthy diet may not be enough and medical intervention may become necessary.

IMBALANCE OF HORMONES

Even so, a healthy diet remains vital in maintaining a healthy body weight, which can impact your menstrual cycles.

Any woman may experience irregular menses from time to time. In most cases, there is no serious underlying cause.

The average menstrual cycle lasts 28 days and it is considered normal if it ranges between 24 and 35 days.

It is, however, important to ascertain the cause of persistently irregular menses.

There are several lifestyle factors which can upset the balance of hormones and cause this problem.

Examples are stress, extreme weight loss or weight gain and excessive exercise.

Monthly periods are quite susceptible to dips and spikes, according to one's emotions and health. Most of the time, once the woman's life returns to normal, so will her menses.

We may have heard of people

whose menses stopped after they suddenly lost a lot of weight or began a strenuous exercise routine.

For instance, woman athletes menstruate less often than non-athletic women of a similar age.

However, irregular menses can sometimes be linked to certain medical conditions such as thyroid hormone abnormalities, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) or, very rarely, prolactin hormone secreting abnormalities.

Once identified, all of the above conditions would show a good response to treatment.

PCOS is a common cause of irregular menses. Women with this syndrome have very small (less than 1cm) cysts on their ovaries and hormonal imbalance.

The symptoms vary from woman to woman and may include irregular or no menses, excessive facial or body hair, oily skin, acne and, sometimes, difficulty in conceiving.

Being overweight increases the risk of developing these symptoms.

For overweight women with PCOS, the symptoms can be improved by losing weight, which will also help with irregular menses and improve their chances of ovulation.

Other treatments for PCOS include hormone treatment, such as oral contraceptive pills, to regulate menses. It can also help to reduce excessive facial hair, oily skin and acne, if these symptoms are not responsive to local treatment.

It is important to be assessed by a gynaecologist to ascertain the underlying cause of your condition.

Your doctor will need a detailed history of your menses, lifestyle and medical problems. A physical exam will also be performed.

To arrive at a diagnosis, your doctor may then prescribe certain tests, such as ultrasound scans or blood tests, to assess your hormonal levels. Treatment will depend on the reason for your irregular menses.



DR LIEW HUI MIN,
associate consultant,
dermatology service at KK
Women's and Children's
Hospital (KKH)



DR MANISHA MATHU,
consultant, department
of obstetrics and
gynaecology at KKH