

QUESTION: What are reliable sources of information about acne and its treatment?

Many of you asked us where you can get reliable, evidence-based advice about acne and its treatment. This sounds like such a simple question to answer but it isn't. The internet is awash with information and advice but how much of it can be trusted?

When you go to an acne related web site, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who owns and operates the site? Is this information easy to find, hidden or not available?
- Is it updated regularly and does it disclose when the last up-date took place?
- Does the site tell you that its content is evidence based? If it doesn't, then it probably isn't.
- Does the site plug a particular type of treatment? If so, does it tell you how this treatment was tested and how it compares in terms of efficacy and safety to well established ones or other products of a similar type?

In the main, you can trust sites set up and run by reputable bodies such as the NHS and the American Society for Dermatology. The information on these sites will be impartial and based on the best available evidence but may not always be up-to-date. Be cautious of sites set up by individuals, especially people who don't disclose their qualifications or expertise. The opinion of one person is not reliable even if the person says they are an expert. Many web sites about spots and acne are set up by manufacturers or providers of products/therapeutic techniques. These sites are generally unhelpful for finding out what treatments work best because the site owners have a specific product, product range or technique to sell.

If you aren't sure that some information you've found on one web site is true, check it out on some others. If the message is consistent, it is probably true. If it is inconsistent, be wary.

Quite a few acne related web sites carry product ratings sent in by the public – a bit like Amazon does for the things it sells. Treatments can be given one to five stars by each person who reviews them and the rating is averaged. Don't start to believe these ratings until hundreds of people have scored the product in question. The average rating you get from a handful of people will not be reliable. Beware star ratings on product manufacturers' own web sites - if you're interested in ratings, go to an independent site or to a site run by a retailer that sells lots of products but doesn't make any (an on-line pharmacy for example).

we have compiled a shortlist of web sites which you may find interesting or useful. But remember, apply the check list above to these sites as well as any others you may visit. No site is perfect.

If you are cautious about the reliability of information on the internet, there are other sources of information you might find useful. You could try asking a pharmacist – not one on the sales staff but the pharmacist on duty. Most pharmacies now have an area where you can speak to the pharmacist in private. Remember though that a pharmacist is trained in drug-based treatments so cannot advise you about physical or alternative therapies or about diet. Most pharmacies sell a range of cosmetic remedies for spots but the pharmacist won't know which ones work best.

The British Association of Dermatologists (BAD) provides a leaflet about acne, copies of which are often available from hospital dermatology out-patient departments. The leaflet is also available to download at <http://www.bad.org.uk/site/793/default.aspx>.

Finally, there are a number of books written for people with acne. If you prefer to find out about acne and its treatment from a book, be careful to choose one that is up-to-date and written by a suitably qualified or experienced person.

Wherever you read it, if something sounds too good to be true it probably is. No acne treatment works perfectly for everyone and one person's experience can be very different from another's.