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Over-the-counter Acne Treatments

A Review

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ABSTRACT

Acne is a common dermatological disorder that most frequently affects adolescents; however, individuals may be affected at all ages. Many people who suffer from acne seek treatment from both prescription and over-the-counter acne medications. Due to convenience, lower cost, and difficulty getting an appointment with a dermatologist, the use of over-the-counter acne treatments is on the rise. As the plethora of over-the-counter acne treatment options can be overwhelming, it is important that dermatologists are well-versed on this subject to provide appropriate information about treatment regimens and potential drug interactions and that their patients see them as well-informed. This article reviews the efficacy of various over-the-counter acne treatments based on the current literature. A thorough literature review revealed there are many types of over-the-counter acne treatments and each are designed to target at least one of the pathogenic pathways that are reported to be involved in the development of acne lesions. Many of the key over-the-counter ingredients are incorporated in different formulations to broaden the spectrum and consumer appeal of available products. Unfortunately, many over-the-counter products are not well-supported by clinical studies, with a conspicuous absence of double-blind or investigator-blind, randomized, vehicle-controlled studies. Most studies that do exist on over-the-counter acne products are often funded by the manufacturer. Use of over-the-counter acne treatments is a mainstay in our society and it is important that dermatologists are knowledgeable about the different options, including potential benefits and limitations. Overall, over-the-counter acne therapies can be classified into the following five major groups: cleansers, leave-on products, mechanical treatments, essential oils, and vitamins. (*J Clin Aesthet Dermatol.* 2012;5(5):32–40.)

Acne vulgaris (AV) affects nearly everyone at some point in life. Each year, AV continues to be one of the top three dermatological disorders encountered in outpatient dermatological practice, historically affecting mainly teenagers and late preteens. However, the prevalence of adult AV is increasing, especially in women 25 years of age or older. Approximately 81 to 95 percent of adolescent boys and 79 to 82 percent of girls are affected, compared to 3 and 12 percent of adult men and women, respectively.¹ Despite prevalence of AV being highest among adolescents, the mean age of presentation to a physician for treatment is 24 years of age, with the average age of the patient enrolled in clinical trials.² There are approximately 45 million people affected by AV in the United States. In 2001, the healthcare expenditure of AV was estimated to exceed one billion dollars.³

While overall sales of prescription acne medications have decreased over recent years, there has been an increase in

sales of over-the-counter (OTC) acne treatments. Different products line the shelves of pharmacies and department stores around the country, with many advertising that they are “dermatologist recommended.” One popular OTC acne kit (Proactiv®), marketed as a treatment system, was projected to generate over 800 billion dollars in revenue in 2010.⁴ An impressive marketing strategy and celebrity endorsements have made Proactiv® one of the most popular skincare lines of all time. Most OTC acne treatments are not supported by the same level of global media exposure, marketing dollars, or “pop culture power.” Nevertheless, sales of OTC treatments for AV continue to grow because of lower immediate “out-of-pocket” cost compared to prescriptions, outcome promises made within certain marketing or promotional efforts, convenience, the desire to find that one special acne product or treatment program that clears acne quickly, and/or difficulties with access to dermatology practices. Sometimes these access difficulties

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