

Why medical students don't seek treatment for acne vulgaris, patient's perspective

Nadia Sultan¹, Ayusha Iftikhar², Sameen Hashmi², Saima Rehman³, Ghazala Butt⁴, Mahwash Rana⁵

¹Department of Dermatology, Rahbar Medical and Dental College, Lahore.

²Department of Dermatology, Punjab Rangers Teaching Hospital, Lahore.

³Department of Dermatology, Saidu Medical College, Swat.

⁴Department of Dermatology, KEMU/ Mayo Hospital, Lahore.

⁵Department of Dermatology, Continental Medical College, Lahore.

Abstract

Objective Medical students have a high prevalence of developing acne owing to the increased level of stress they are exposed to, yet the threshold for treatment is still very high. The objective of the current study was to find out the perspective of the medical students suffering from acne vulgaris, as to why they do not seek treatment for their acne.

Methods A study on acne was conducted in the Dermatology Department of Punjab Rangers Teaching Hospital. Total number of 70 medical students of Rahbar Medical and Dental college from first year to final year were enrolled in the study. A questionnaire was formulated and circulated among the students addressing the severity, duration of disease and the reasons for not taking any treatment. The data was recorded and the results were interpreted to determine those reasons which the patients mentioned themselves, as to why their acne was not being treated.

Results Among total 70 patients, there were 45 females and 25 males between 18 -27 years of age. The maximum number of participants having acne were final year students. According to severity, 37 (52.9%) participants had mild acne, 30 (42.9%) had moderate and only 3 (4.3%) had severe acne. The duration of the acne was between 2 months to 5 years. Variable responses were noted as: 36 (51.4%) patients reported that acne is self-healing; 18 (25.7%) reported that they have occasional eruption; 10 (14.3%) did not feel like taking any treatment; 5 (7.1%) patients believed that treatment would aggravate/ worsen their disease while 1 (1.4%) patient thought that treatment was expensive.

Conclusion Maximum number of patients believed that acne is self- healing.

Key words

Acne vulgaris; Medical Students; Self-Healing.

Introduction Acne vulgaris is a skin condition which is affecting most of our population. In this disease pilosebaceous unit (consisting of hair follicle, sebaceous gland and arrector pili muscle) found on face, neck, back, chest get obstructed and inflamed by a microbe called Propionibacterium acnes, Obstruction and

inflammation occur because of increased bacterial growth and more sebum production.¹ Acne occur mostly due to hormonal changes so it affects a specific age group like adolescents and young adults.² In our clinical settings most of acne patients present with open and closed comedones, papules, pustules and acne scars which formed due to dermal tissue damage.³ Acne not only leaves scars, but also affects quality of life and may lead to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.⁴ According to a survey by Poli *et al.*, acne patients have a lot of

Address for correspondence

Dr. Nadia Sultan, Associate Professor,
Department of Dermatology,
Rahbar Medical and Dental College, Lahore.
Email: drnadiaasad82@gmail.com

wrong beliefs and misconceptions. According to his study 80.8% of French people don't think that acne is a disease but occur normally in adolescents, only 69.3% agreed that acne is a disease and treatment is necessary. Other misconceptions of the people about acne in this study are it is caused by milk products, fatty food, sweets, sweating, pollution and makeup.⁵ Many of these myths and misconceptions are because patients and even medical students who themselves have acne don't have awareness, knowledge and good practices.⁶ A lot of knowledge and information is obtained from social media by patients and medical students which is very problematic. According to a study in Karachi social media is the main source of acne knowledge in medical students instead of academic journals and textbooks.⁷

Methods

A general survey was done in order to find out why medical students are not taking acne treatment. Location of this study was dermatology department outdoor of Punjab Rangers Teaching Hospital Lahore. All medical students of Rahbar Medical and Dental College suffering from acne from 1st year to final year were included in this study. A close ended questionnaire was formulated addressing the Age, Gender, Severity, Duration of disease and the reasons for not taking treatment.

The sample size of the study was 70 participants. The sample was collected after explaining the purpose of our research and by taking verbal consent from the participants. Completely filled questionnaires were collected, data was recorded and the results were interpreted to determine those reasons which the patients mentioned themselves, as to why their acne was not being treated.

Only students of RMDC from 1st year to final

year who clinically had Acne but were not taking any treatment for it. Acne was graded as mild, moderate and severe

Mild acne Patient has many whiteheads, blackheads, less papules and pustules.

Moderate acne Many whiteheads, blackheads, papules and pustules.

Severe acne A large number of painful papules, pustules, nodules, cysts and some scars.

All the students who had no Acne or those who were taking treatment for acne were excluded from the research.

Results

In our sample of 70 there were 45 females (64.3%) and 25 males (35.7%). From this data we can conclude that acne is more common in females as compared to males. The age range of participants is 18-27 years.

Out of 70 participants 37 has mild acne, 30 has moderate acne, 3 has severe acne (**Table 1**).

All of the 70 participants who took part in our research have not taken any kind of treatment.

Out of 70 students 27 (maximum) have been facing acne for last 2 years and the minimum duration of acne is 1 month (**Table 2**).

Our main focus of study was why medical students are not taking treatment. From the data we collected 51.4% are not taking any kind of treatment and the main reason is self-healing,

Table 1 Severity of acne.

Severity of acne	Number	Percent
Mild	37	52.9
Moderate	30	42.9
Severe	3	4.3
Total	70	100.0

Table 2 Students facing acne.

<i>Students facing acne since</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1 month	1	1.4
3 month	4	5.7
4 month	2	2.9
6 month	6	8.6
7 month	2	2.9
8 month	2	2.9
9 month	1	1.4
1 year	10	14.3
2 year	27	38.6
3 year	8	11.4
4 year	3	4.3
5 year	4	5.7
Total	70	100.0

Table 3 Reasons for not taking treatment.

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Self- healing	36	51.4
Occasional eruption	18	25.7
Treatment is not required	10	14.3
Treatment would aggravate disease	5	7.1
Treatment was expensive	1	1.4
Total	70	100.0

only 1 student is not taking treatment because treatment is expensive (**Table 3**).

Discussion

Acne vulgaris greatly affects the quality of life. This disease poses not only a cosmetic disfigurement to its sufferers, but also triggers many psychological disturbances. Medical students are one of those groups of population who are believed to have maximum awareness regarding diseases and their outcomes. However, acne like in general public is still underrated even in this highly aware population. The level of knowledge and spread of myths contribute a great deal and seem to be of crucial importance here. It is generally observed that people do not treat acne in the right time owing to the wide range of myths and misconceptions that they relate to its etiology and treatment outcomes.

We felt a desire to conduct a survey among our medical students who were suffering from acne

but never felt a need to get it treated. This class of our population is subject to great stress which additionally predisposes them to the development and worsening of acne. However, a limited percentage is on a regular treatment while the rest have either not started it or have discontinued it somehow.

Literature surfing shows that medical professionals which include medical students, staff nurses, and doctors all had very less information about acne when there are asked about acne vulgaris.⁸ The lack of knowledge is problematic because patients go to their doctors regarding the disease and its outcome. Underestimation of the severity and progression of acne delays treatment.⁹ Majority of students in the current study (67 out of 70) only had mild to moderate acne, hence students only view acne as trivial and insignificant.¹⁰

According to a study done in Saudi Arabia, 19.3% of the patients viewed acne as trivial and insignificant and don't seek any kind of treatment¹¹ compared to our study where 14.3 percent responded similarly.

In another study conducted on 1136 university students, (53.7%) reported for not being bothered enough to seek treatment whereas in the current study 14.3 percent responded similarly, while 45.1% believed that their acne shall resolve on its own similar to 51.4% of our patients who also thought that self- healing will take place. Self-Healing is the major reason considered among medical students for not treating acne however this has very disfiguring cosmetic sequele which later turn out to be very problematic. 35.2% were concerned about the cost of treatment compared to 1.4% of our students.¹²

Another study conducted on acne patients and family physicians reported that 52% patients and

44% family physicians thought that it was just transitory related to puberty and required no treatment.¹³

A similar study was conducted on 900 school students 15-19 year of age who has acne. 56.44% reported that the treatment of acne is not easy to keep compliance as regular dermatological follow up visits were required however no similar response was received from our students. One reason for not getting a similar response could be enrollment of medical students in our study who have a very easy access to hospital.¹⁴

The present study shows that not only the patients but also the medical students expected to be most aware of a disease have major gaps in their knowledge about acne. It is highly desired to work on this subject more and create awareness among our students that Acne is a completely treatable disease. Timely treatment is essential to prevent the complications related to it which may affect the cosmetic, social, interpersonal or psychological domains.

Conclusion

We can conclude from the results of the current study that self-healing of acne vulgaris is reported to be the most common misconception hindering the timely treatment of this disease.

References

1. Cooper AJ, Harris VR: Modern management of acne. *Med J Aust.* 2017; 206:41-5.
2. Oge' LK, Broussard A, Marshall MD: Acne vulgaris: diagnosis and treatment. *Am Fam Physician.* 2019;100:475-84.
3. Juhl CR, Bergholdt HK, Miller IM, Jemec GB, Kanters JK, Ellervik C: Dairy intake and acne vulgaris: a systematic review and meta-analysis of 78,529 children, adolescents, and young adults. *Nutrients.* 2018;10:10.
4. Simić D, Situm M, Letica E, Penavić JZ, Zivković MV, Tomić T: Psychological impact of isotretinoin treatment in patients with moderate and severe acne. *Coll Antropol.* 2009; 33:15-9.
5. Uslu G, Sendur N, Uslu M, Savk E, Karaman G, *et al.* Acne: prevalence, perceptions and effects on psychological health among adolescents in Aydin, Turkey. *J Eur Acad Dermatol Venereol.* 2008;22:462-9.
6. Allayali AZ, Asseri BN, AlNodali NI, Alhunaki RNM, Algoblan SFG (2017) Assessment of Prevalence, Knowledge, Attitude, and Psychosocial Impact of Acne Vulgaris among Medical Students in Saudi Arabia. *J Clin Exp Dermatol Res* 8:404.
7. Ali G, Mehtab K, Sheikh ZA, Ali HG, Abdel Kader S, Mansoor H, *et al.* Beliefs and perceptions of acne among a sample of students from Sindh Medical College, Karachi. *J Pak Med Assoc.* 2010;60:51-4.
8. Thiboutot D, Dréno B, Layton A. Acne counseling to improve adherence. *Cutis.* 2008;81:81-6
9. Brajac I, Bilic-Zulle L, Tkalcic M, Loncarek K, Gruber F. Acne vulgaris: Myths and misconceptions among patients and family physicians. *Patient Educ Couns.* 2004;54:21-5
10. Rasmussen JE, Smith SB. Patient concepts and misconceptions about acne. *Arch Dermatol.* 1983;119:570-2
11. Al-Hoqail IA. Knowledge, beliefs and perception of youth toward acne vulgaris Saudi Med J. 2003;24:765-8
12. Brajac, Ines, Bilic-Zulle, Lidija, Tkalčić, Mladenka, Loncarek, Karmen, *et al.* Acne vulgaris: Myths and misconceptions among patients and family physicians. Patient education and counseling. 2004.54;21-5.
13. Baird E, Click I, Kotsonis R, Bibb L. Reasons why adults do not seek treatment for acne: a survey of university students and staff. *J Dermatolog Treat.* 2022;33(8):3188-90.
14. Tałasiewicz, Konrad & Ołdakowska, Agnieszka & Szczerkowska-Dobosz, Aneta. (2012). Evaluation of knowledge about acne vulgaris among a selected population of adolescents of Tricity schools. *Advances in Dermatology and Allergology.* 2012;6:417-20.