

Breaking Out

A report on the acne patient
experience in Canada

Highlights, Executive Summary & Recommendations

September 2022



Acne and Rosacea
Society of Canada



CSPA | Canadian Skin
Patient Alliance

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

The objective of the survey was to understand Canadian patient experiences with acne including acne onset, healthcare resource use, experiences with treatments and impact on quality of life. Of the respondents, 37% reported having mild acne, nearly half (47%) reported moderate acne and 16% indicated severe acne. Here is what we found:

Lasting effects of acne: The vast majority of respondents reported they have scarring and pigmentation due to their acne (87% and 90% respectively), representing significant, lasting and detrimental manifestations of acne.

Challenges in everyday life: The vast majority of respondents (97%) report struggling to control their acne with the most prevalent challenges being hiding acne, trying to identify triggers and out-of-pocket expenses.

Emotional impact: Half of the respondents reported they are often or always concerned that their skin will never clear up, while 44% often or always feel self-conscious due to their acne and one-quarter avoid social interactions regularly.

Experiences with the health care system

- Number of healthcare visits to get help: Almost half of respondents (42%) said they had between 2 - 5 healthcare visits before being diagnosed and prescribed treatment.
- Rating medical care: While many (58%) were satisfied or strongly satisfied with medical care they received, nearly one-quarter were dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied.

Treatment effectiveness and costs

- **Treatment goals:** Top reasons to undergo treatment were the ability to enjoy personal relationships, having less scarring and having fewer changes in skin pigment.
- **Acne treatments:** Isotretinoin pills were the most effective treatment option seen in the survey. Some 59% of respondents had used these pills, with 28% reporting significant improvement and 43% improving slightly. Hormone pills, including birth control and spironolactone pills, were the second most effective treatment option. Of 59% who used them, 23% had significant improvement and 36% had minor improvement.
- **Financial burden of personal acne treatments:** Facials and peels were used by 53% of respondents with 12% paying more than \$500 for each session. Some 65% of those surveyed used light or laser therapy with 15% spending more than \$500 each time.

SURVEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1
Increase access to new treatment options that are safe and effective.

2
Ensure health care providers who see patients with acne are aware of all new and existing treatment options.

3
Evaluate every patient with acne for depression and anxiety and connect them with support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Acne is a highly prevalent dermatological condition, affecting approximately 20% of Canadians, with visible signs including blackheads, whiteheads, pustules (pus-filled bumps) and deep cysts, that often result in scarring and dark marks. Acne is classified into mild, moderate and severe forms, and each is associated with a negative impact on a patient's emotional well-being due to the very noticeable manifestations of this condition. Individuals with acne often have a higher risk of anxiety and depression, and report that their condition impedes their ability to socialize and conduct daily activities with confidence. Treatments range from drugstore face washes and creams, to over-the-counter products, to prescription topical and oral medications and skin procedures.

In 2022, the Canadian Skin Patient Alliance and the Acne and Rosacea Society of Canada developed a survey for Canadians with acne. The Canadian Skin Patient Alliance is a national not-for-profit patient organization formed to help Canadians affected by skin, hair and nail conditions through collaboration, advocacy and education. The Acne and Rosacea Society of Canada is a national, not-for-profit organization led by Canadian dermatologists, that aims to improve the lives of Canadians suffering with these two common skin conditions by raising awareness and providing independent, reputable information. The objective of their collaborative survey was to understand patient experiences with acne including onset, healthcare resource use, experiences with treatments, and impact on quality of life.

In June 2022, the survey was disseminated by the two organizations to Canadians with acne via various social media channels, as well as through networks of healthcare providers.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

The survey was conducted in June 2022, and 154 survey responses were received from 149 individuals with acne and five caregivers who were responding on behalf of the person to whom they provide care.

Of the 154 survey respondents:

- All provinces were represented, with 30% from Ontario and 20% from BC
- 68% were female
- 62% were Caucasian and 15% were Aboriginal
- Average age was 28 years (range: 16-49 years)
- 55% were adults between the ages of 20 and 29

Most respondents first experienced pimples and breakouts as adolescents or teenagers, with the average age of onset being 17 years old. However, the range was 8 to 42 years, demonstrating that acne can be experienced both in childhood and well into adulthood. Ninety percent of respondents reported that they had seen a healthcare provider for their pimples and breakouts and of these, 45% saw their family physician first while 22% had their initial healthcare visit with a dermatologist (likely after a referral from a family physician).

When asked how many healthcare visits the respondents had for their pimples or breakouts before being diagnosed with acne (or prescribed treatment), the most common response was 2 - 5 appointments (42%) and nearly 30% visited a healthcare provider more than five times. Our findings indicate that diagnosis is not always straightforward, and that patients are not typically prescribed treatment in their first visit with a

healthcare provider. Many respondents reported seeing multiple different types of healthcare providers for their acne (two on average, with a range of one to five), most commonly family physicians, dermatologists and walk-in clinic providers. Of all respondents, 58% reported that they were satisfied or strongly satisfied with the care they have received from the health care system for the management of their acne although nearly one-quarter expressed dissatisfaction/strong dissatisfaction, indicating room for improvement.

When asked about the severity of their acne, 37% of respondents reported a mild condition (blackheads, whiteheads and a few red pustules and papules intermittently). Nearly half of all respondents (47%) reported having moderate acne (blackheads, whiteheads and red pustules and papules on face), while 16% indicated severe acne (facial redness with numerous red papules and pustules, and swollen lumps and bumps on face, chest and/or back). The vast majority of respondents reported that they have scarring and pigmentation changes due to their acne (87% and 90%, respectively), representing very significant, lasting and detrimental manifestations of this condition.

“Acne has left my face unrecognizable. My mental state is very depressed, prone to psychological disorders. This seriously affects my quality of life.”

Respondents have tried multiple prescription and non-prescription treatments as well as skin procedures to try to gain control of their acne and were asked about their experiences. Non-prescription skin care products containing salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide were the most used treatment: 95% of respondents reported that they had tried this option, likely due to it being the most easily attainable and perhaps least costly as well. Of those, 52% reported a little improvement and 6% reported significant improvement.

More than half (59%) of respondents reported that they had used isotretinoin pills to treat their acne, and it was the most effective treatment option seen in the survey, with 28% of individuals reporting significant improvement and 43% improving slightly.

Hormone pills were the second most effective treatment option for those surveyed. Of the 59% who reported having used them, 23% had significant improvement and 36% had minor improvement. It appears that prescription treatments may not be prescribed readily to those with acne, though future research is needed to understand whether this is due to physician perception that the patient may not be a good candidate for benefits, patient hesitation, or lack of insurance coverage for the patient.

The majority of respondents (95%) reported that they experienced acne treatment-related adverse effects in the last year, the most common being skin irritation (64%), dry skin (62%) and skin flaking (55%). When asked about current topical acne products (non-prescription and prescription), 85% of respondents reported that they were experiencing side effects due to their current regimen. Minor side effects were reported by nearly 70% of respondents, and most were willing to accept them because the treatment was effective. Sixteen percent of individuals reported severe or very severe side effects, but their willingness to tolerate them was based on treatment effectiveness. Patients are clearly balancing

out their desire to clear their skin - or at least improve it - with the harshness and discomfort of side effects, when deciding whether to start or continue their medications.

Respondents were asked to rank the importance of various factors in deciding if their acne treatment had achieved their goals. The three most prioritized goals were the ability to enjoy personal relationships, having less scarring, and having fewer changes in skin pigment. More respondents reported satisfaction with prescription treatments (58%) than non-prescription treatments (44%). It is evident that treatment gaps exist for individuals with acne, and facilitation of access to effective and safe treatments is needed.

Survey respondents reported their monthly out-of-pocket costs due to prescription and non-prescription treatments for acne. Nearly one-quarter indicated that they spend more than \$50 every month on non-prescription acne products. For prescription products including isotretinoin and hormone pills, 15% and 20% of respondents (respectively) reported that they spent over \$50 monthly, demonstrating a considerable financial burden that is not being covered by insurance. Facials and peels were used by 53% of respondents; 12% of respondents reported paying more than \$500 for each session. Sixty-five percent of respondents used light or laser therapy, and 15% spent more than \$500 each time. These costs add to the financial burden of acne.

Through completion of the acne patient questionnaire CompAQ short-form, respondents reported acne's detrimental impact on their quality of life. Half of the respondents reported that they are often or always concerned that their skin will never clear up, while 44% often or always feel self-conscious due to their acne and one-quarter avoid social interactions regularly. Respondents reported various strategies to hide acne, most commonly using make-up to cover affected areas (63%) and avoiding social gatherings (59%). Individuals with acne are clearly negatively impacted by their skin, and the consequences are far-reaching, involving a reduced sense of well-being and a reluctance to engage socially.

Respondents reported spending significant time every month on activities related to treating their acne, specifically on applying creams and treatments, and researching information. The vast majority of respondents (97%) reported struggling to control their acne, with the most prevalent challenges being hiding acne, trying to identify triggers, and out-of-pocket expenses.

“
My biggest struggle is trying product after product after product and getting discouraged because nothing is working and not knowing why I have acne (i.e. diet vs. hormones vs. something else entirely).
”

The findings described in this report illuminate important patient needs and opportunities for improvement in the treatment and management of acne in Canada and can be used to inform future research and policy initiatives. Based on these findings, CSPA and the Acne and Rosacea Society of Canada have outlined 3 recommendations to improve the lives of those with acne.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From our survey findings, we have developed several stakeholder recommendations to improve the lives of individuals with acne. For each recommendation, we have designated which government bodies, organizations and groups would be involved with its implementation.

1. Increase access to new treatment options for acne that are safe and effective.

The psychological impacts of acne are significant with widespread consequences to all aspects of daily life including the ability to work, socialize and conduct routine activities without feeling the need to mask the pimples and breakouts, or avoiding social contact altogether. The need for new, effective, and affordable treatments with fewer side effects is critical to allow those with acne to gain back their sense of well-being.



2. Ensure that healthcare providers who are likely to see patients with acne are aware of all new and existing treatment options available.

Family physicians are typically the first clinicians seen by people experiencing pimples and breakouts, and it is important that they are up-to-date on the new treatment pathways for acne. This will ensure that treatment can begin more immediately, to limit the condition's detrimental impact on the individual's quality of life. All education of healthcare providers should stress the damaging psychosocial impact of acne, the importance of early intervention and treatment to prevent scarring and changes in skin pigmentation which patients listed as two of the prioritized goals of treatment, and the need for sensitivity in interactions with patients with acne.



3. Evaluate every patient with acne for depression and anxiety and connect them with support.

Individuals with acne often have a higher risk of anxiety and depression, and report that their condition impedes their ability to comfortably socialize and conduct daily activities with confidence. To ensure that those who need it receive support services as quickly as possible, every patient diagnosed with acne should be evaluated for depression and anxiety, and offered support, care and referral to a specialist, when appropriate.





Acne and Rosacea
Society of Canada



Canadian Skin Patient Alliance

Alliance canadienne des
patients en dermatologie