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For more information visit the Acne Support website: www.acnesupport.org.uk

Guide to Acne Scarring

Acne scarring is very common and affects one in five people who have suffered with acne at some point in their life.

Everyone's skin heals differently and whether or not we scar is largely down to our DNA. Other factors that can contribute to acne scarring are the depth of an acne lesion in the skin, picking or squeezing of acne lesions, skin colour and smoking.

The more inflamed an acne lesion becomes the more likely it is to scar, this is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible.

On this page you will find information on the different types of acne scar that can occur, what causes them and how they can be reduced in size and appearance through treatment. It is important to remember that, whilst most scars can be reduced in appearance, treatment for acne scarring is not readily available on the NHS.

Indented Scarring

Rolling scars

What are rolling scars?

Rolling scars are a common type of scarring that can occur as a result of the acne healing process. They appear as indents in the skin and tend to measure a few millimetres wide. They are defined by their sloping edges, giving the skin a wavy, uneven appearance and aren't always the same size as the original acne lesion that caused them, as the size depends on how the skin heals.

Rolling scars are more common in areas of the face where the skin is thicker, such as the lower cheeks and jaw.

What factors make it more likely scars will form

Like all acne scars, the formation of rolling scars is largely dependent on how your skin heals. If you tend to scar easily then you are more likely to develop acne scars.

Inflammation also plays a key role in development of acne scars. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely it is to scar upon healing. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of scarring. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop acne scars if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of scarring in general.

Boxcar scars

What are boxcar scars

Boxcar scars are a common type of scarring that can occur as a result of the acne healing process. They appear as indents in the skin and tend to measure a few millimetres wide. They are defined by their sharp edges that move straight down into the skin and aren't always the same size as the original acne lesion that caused them, as the size depends on how the skin heals.

Boxcar scars are more common in areas of the face where the skin is thicker, such as the lower cheeks and jaw.

What factors make it more likely that boxcar scars will form?

Like all acne scars, the formation of boxcar scars is largely dependent on how your skin heals. If you tend to scar easily then you are more likely to develop acne scars.

Inflammation also plays a key role in development of acne scars. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely it is to scar upon healing. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of scarring. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop acne scars if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of scarring in general.

Ice-pick scars

What are ice-pick scars?

Ice-pick scars are a common type of scarring that can occur as a result of the acne healing process. They appear as small, sharp indentations that are wider at the skin's surface and narrow into a point as they reach down into the skin. They aren't always the same size as the original acne lesion that caused them, as the size depends on how the skin heals.

Ice-pick scars are more common in areas of the face where the skin is thinner, such as the forehead and upper cheeks, and are one of the harder types of acne scar to treat.

What factors make it more likely that ice-pick scars will form?

Like all acne scars, the formation of ice-pick scars is largely dependent on how your skin heals. If you tend to scar easily then you are more likely to develop acne scars.

Inflammation also plays a key role in development of acne scars. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely it is to scar upon healing. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of scarring. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop acne scars if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of scarring in general.

Elevated Scarring

Perifollicular Elastolysis Scars (PFE)

What are perifollicular elastolysis scars?

Perifollicular elastolysis scarring, otherwise known as PFE scarring, is an uncommon type of scarring that can occur as a result of the acne healing process.

PFE scars appear as flesh coloured or yellowish lesions. They can be small or quite large in size and are often mistaken for acne lesions, especially when they are surrounded by acne lesions. They are formed by the loss of a protein known as elastin in the skin, which helps the skin return to its original shape after injury.

PFE scars are more common on the chest, back and shoulders, where the skin is thicker, although they can occur around the jaw line.

What factors make it more likely that PFE scars will form?

Like all acne scars, the formation of PFE scars is largely dependent on how your skin heals. If you tend to scar easily then you are more likely to develop acne scars.

Inflammation also plays a key role in development of acne scars. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely it is to scar upon healing. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of scarring. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop acne scars if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of scarring in general.

Keloid and hypertrophic scars

What are keloid and hypertrophic scars?

Keloid and hypertrophic scars are common types of scarring that can occur as a result of the acne healing process. They appear as raised lesions of scar tissue on the skin and are a result of the overgrowth of fibrous tissue in the region where the acne lesion had developed.

They are more common on the chest, back and shoulders, where the skin is thicker, although they can occur around the jaw line. They are also more common in people with darker skin types.

What is the difference between keloid and hypertrophic scars?

The difference between keloid and hypertrophic scars is their size in relation to the acne lesions that caused them. A keloid scar is larger than the acne lesion that caused it. A hypertrophic scar is the same size as the acne lesion that caused it.

What factors make it more likely that keloid and hypertrophic scars will form?

Like all acne scars, the formation of keloid and hypertrophic scars is largely dependent on how your skin heals. If you tend to scar easily then you are more likely to develop acne scars.

Inflammation also plays a key role in development of acne scars. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely it is to scar upon healing. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of scarring. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop acne scars if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of scarring in general.

People with darker skin types are also at a higher risk of developing thicker keloid and hypertrophic scars as they have a variety of genetic factors that increase the likelihood of thickened scars occurring.

Skin Discolouration

What is skin discolouration?

Skin discolouration is a common side effect of the acne healing process where the skin around an acne lesion changes colour from your natural skin tone and is left discoloured after the acne lesion has healed.

Acne lesions can cause skin discolouration in a number of ways. Blood vessels in the area of the lesion may dilate as part of the body's healing response, leaving the skin looking red or purple. Damage to the skin cells by acne lesions may also cause the cells to release more melanin, which is a pigment that causes the skin to look brown.

Sometimes the body will clear these causes of skin discolouration over time and the skin will return to its original complexion. However, these changes to the skin may not heal and can become permanent.

Skin discolouration as a result of acne can occur anywhere on the body that acne forms and is largely dependent on how your skin heals.

What factors make it more likely that skin discolouration will occur?

Inflammation plays a role in the development of skin discolouration. The deeper that inflammation from an acne lesion reaches into the skin the more likely discolouration is to occur. This is one of the reasons that it is important to treat acne as soon as possible, to lower the risk of deep inflammation.

Picking or squeezing acne lesions can damage the skin and lead to an increased chance of discolouration. It is not advised that you pick at or squeeze your acne.

You are also more likely to develop discolouration if you smoke, as smoking leads to an increased risk of skin damage in general.

People with darker skin types are also at a higher risk of developing discolouration as darker skin also produces more pigment after it has been damaged than lighter skin, meaning that discolouration is more likely.