

In the Clear... for Good!



**Homeopathy heals severe cystic acne—
lets Lara face a brighter future**

By AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

I SOMETIMES THINK ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN OUR CULTURE... WE SO OFTEN judge a person by how they look. I like to think I am not so shallow and that I care more about the quality of a person's internal attributes than about how they appear on the outside. That said, externally visible or "disfiguring" symptoms can cause a person terrific pain, both psychological and otherwise. Cystic acne is one such example. Thankfully, it is also one condition that, in my experience, homeopathy and natural medicine can really help.

An inflammatory process

Our skin has tiny sebaceous glands that naturally secrete sebum (an oily substance) into the hair follicles. Sebum normally flows up the hair shaft and onto the skin, where it lubricates the skin and hair. When hair follicles become blocked with sebum and dead skin cells, however, we have the start of acne. Inflammation in the area then occurs alongside excessive keratin and normal skin bacteria that gets trapped, which can further plug the hair follicle. When this inflammatory process is up and running, it can be difficult to stop.

Acne can have many contributing factors. Heredity is one difficult-to-control aspect, as we do see acne running in families. Shifts in hormones, such as reaching adolescence (when androgen hormones kick in and trigger the growth of sebaceous glands) or starting or stopping oral contraceptives, can also cause acne. Certain medications can lead to acne, too, as can exposing the skin to heavy oils, certain cosmetics, and even unfavorable climates.

Scar wars

Just about everyone has dealt with unwelcome acne breakouts at some time in their lives and to varying degrees—pimples, whiteheads, blackheads, and raised red bumps (papules). Perhaps a big pimple appeared on your nose the morning of an important job interview. Or angry red bumps sprang up on your back the day of the all-school beach party or the prom. Although these experiences may be common, they are no less distressing for the person involved. And coping with acne can be especially traumatic for people with severe or longstanding acne.

People with the most severe form—cystic or nodular acne—suffer with very painful bumps (cysts or nodules of trapped pus, sebum, and debris) deep beneath the skin's surface, somewhat like boils. Their skin may be extremely inflamed over large areas of the face, neck, and/or back and be very painful to touch

or pressure. Scarring of the skin is common, and unfortunately, embarrassment and low self-esteem are frequent accompaniments to this condition.

A multifactorial approach

Conventional acne therapy typically starts with topical gels or creams such as benzoyl peroxide to dry out the lesions, Retin-A® to promote cell turnover to keep pores unclogged, or antibiotic ointments to target bacteria in the skin. If that does not work, the next treatment level might be to add oral antibiotics, taken for three or four months at a time. For women, long-term oral contraceptives might be recommended, as this can improve acne in certain women. Laser and light therapies are additional options that occasionally help, but they are costly and not typically covered by insurance. For people with severe cystic acne, the powerful drug Accutane® (isotretinoin) is often prescribed.

The advent of antibiotics, and later Accutane®, has certainly improved the complexion of many an acne sufferer over the past few decades. Yet patients still come to me for help with their severe cystic acne. Perhaps the conventional medicines they tried did not work or did not work well enough. (Antibiotic resistance is a growing problem, for example.) Or maybe the person was unable to tolerate the conventional drugs. Accutane®, for instance, has many serious side effects, from poor night vision to elevated liver enzymes to increased suicide risk. Furthermore, this drug must not be prescribed for women who might become pregnant, because it is likely to produce birth defects.

Facing up to adult acne

I first met Lara when she brought her children to see me for help with their garden-variety childhood issues. I could not help but notice the severe cystic acne all along Lara's nose, chin, and jaw line: angry, deep, large, red cysts that looked painful and made it difficult for her to smile.



Lara rarely wanted to be seen in public.

After successfully working together with Lara on her children's health for a number of months, I decided to broach the topic of her skin. Trying not to be too forward, I asked Lara if she had ever considered using natural medicine and homeopathy to address her acne. "No," she replied. She was 40 years old and had suffered with severe acne since early adolescence—more than 25 years. "I've basically just learned to live with it," Lara said. After seeing the improvements in her children's health since they started treatment, however, she was willing to see if I could help her. So she scheduled a time when she could come in for an appointment without her kids.

Lara's story

Lara told me that nothing she had ever tried—from pharmaceuticals to facials to herbal medicines to dietary changes—had seemed to have much of an effect on her skin. Not her menstrual cycle, not her pregnancies, and not even stress seemed to make any difference in the degree or intensity of her cystic acne.

"What is the worst thing about the acne?" I asked. "Two things," she replied. "It hurts like the dickens, and it makes me even shyer than I naturally am." Lara rarely wanted to be seen in public and had spent most of her married life as a homemaker and then as a homemaker/homeschooler of her two children. She liked the little family and all the domestic activity and was satisfied with her life. But she knew that her children needed more out-

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Clear Skin, Naturally

Follow these steps to banish blemishes

In my practice, each patient is treated individually—there is no “formula” prescription for people with acne. I choose the best constitutional homeopathic remedy for the individual before me, along with making some natural medicine recommendations.

Below are diet and supplement protocols tailored especially for Lara. That said, a similar plan should prove effective for most people suffering with acne, especially if they know their skin gets somewhat better with antibiotics. (If a patient has acne that is more hormonally driven and antibiotics don’t help whatsoever, a different approach would be needed, using diet and supplements to balance the hormones and support liver function, since that is where hormones are metabolized.)

◆ Eat cultured, fermented foods & take probiotics

To boost Laura’s immune system, I suggested she eat more foods that are cultured or fermented: things like yogurt, kefir, miso, and anything pickled the old fashioned way. There are many reasons why eating traditionally fermented foods is good for us. They can be easier to digest because they are partially broken down before ingestion. Such foods also help us to create a proper balance of healthy bacteria in the gut. So many ailments, from cystic acne to irritable bowel syndrome to constipation, may well begin with problems in the gut. Many researchers now believe that even emotional and cognitive challenges can be somewhat helped by addressing gut health. To that end, I also prescribed a multi-strain probiotic.

◆ Take an “antibiotic” multivitamin/herbal supplement

Because we knew that antibiotics had temporarily improved Lara’s skin to some degree, I recommended a multivitamin/herbal combination supplement that has antibiotic characteristics that would work to kill infection and create healthier skin. Optibiotic made by Eclectic Institute is one such product. Two pills contain:

- Vitamin A—10,000 IU
- Vitamin C—500 mg
- Vitamin B-6—15 mg
- Magnesium—15 mg
- Zinc—15 mg
- Bioflavonoids—500 mg
- Echinacea angustifolia and purpurea—455 mg
- Garlic bulb—195 mg
- Myrrh—190mg
- Ginger root—97mg
- Cayenne fruit—65 mg

These vitamins and minerals help to create more balanced immunity and healthy skin cells; the botanicals also work to balance immunity and enhance circulation. I asked Lara to take two pills three times a day *with* meals.

◆ Take flaxseed and borage seed oil

I also recommended that Lara take a combination of flaxseed oil (1500 mg) and borage seed oil (300 mg) once a day for the proven anti-inflammatory effects of these oils.



side stimulation, more people in their lives, and exposure to more activities outside the home. She was also looking ahead to the time when her children would be grown, and she knew she needed to figure out a plan for her own future, which might well include more time in public.

Lara reported that she never had much energy, even going back to childhood. “I’m just one of those people who is low, low energy, always,” she said. Lara was extremely tired throughout the day and often napped in the afternoon, regardless of her eight hours of sleep each night. She also tended to be chilly all the time and often had a hard time warming up, needing extra sweaters and blankets.

She tended to get anxious about her children, worrying about their (generally good) health, their future, and how they would cope with the ever-complicated world. “I verge on being obsessive-compulsive with the house and yard ... I like everything orderly and in its place,” she told me. In general, she did not feel confident and could be easily overwhelmed by her long daily to-do list and the emotional challenges that arose in her extended family. For the most part, Lara just dropped away from conflict or anything that took too much of her energy, as “I just do not have any to spare,” she said. By conserving energy in the places she could, she was better able to devote herself entirely to her children.

Besides cystic acne, Lara struggled with chronic sinusitis. She did not have allergies, but any cold that she caught immediately moved to her sinuses, as if she was unable to fight off the infection. When her sinuses got infected, she felt like she was under water, had lots of congestion in the face, felt pain in the cheek areas, and experienced even deeper fatigue and chilliness than usual. It was not uncommon for Lara to get one or two sinus infections a year and to take antibiotics for each episode. While she was on the antibiotics, she noticed that her skin would get somewhat better, but as soon as she went off the drugs, her skin would get worse again.

Over the years, Lara had tried many different antibiotics for her skin. While she had sometimes noticed a slight improvement in her complexion during these long-term antibiotic regimens, her

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stomach and whole digestive system had not responded well at all. Lara had an underlying tendency for constipation for as long as she could remember, and taking antibiotics would severely exacerbate this tendency, even when she took a probiotic supplement alongside the antibiotic. "It's just not worth the trouble!" she said.

Because the antibiotics were not very effective and her cystic acne was severe, doctors had encouraged her to try Accutane® at various times in her life. But Lara was just too scared of the potentially serious side effects; also while taking this drug, patients have to get periodic blood draws to be sure their liver enzymes stay in the normal range, and Lara hated to give blood.

A remedy for Lara

What would be the best way to help Lara and her seemingly intractable condition? This 40-year-old woman had been suffering with acne her entire adult life—and

then some! I decided to start by finding an individualized constitutional homeopathic remedy to address this *kind* of acne, in this *kind* of person.

When I considered the kind of acne Lara had and the kind of person she was, the remedy *Silica* immediately came to mind. Lara's acne was cystic, hard, and longstanding—almost like small boils—and *Silica* is one of our best-known remedies for addressing boils, abscesses, deep inflammation with pus formation that has been going on a long time, and generally unhealthy skin, including acne.

Just as important, Lara's temperament, personality, and overall physical symptoms fit *Silica* as well. Our homeopathic materia medica texts use the term "want of grit" to describe people needing this remedy because they are often shy with low self-confidence and severely limited energy resources, as Lara was. Homeopath J.T. Kent described this as "lacking stamina... a state of weakness, embarrassment, dread,



yielding... a state where he dreads to appear in public." And, in fact, Lara's acne had led her to almost hide in her home. Her chronic constipation, her low resistance to infections such as sinusitis, and her sensitivity to cold were also strong indications for *Silica*. (Boericke's description of *Silica* says: "cold, chilly, hugs the fire, wants plenty of warm clothing.") Lara's being a bit rigid with her lifestyle and paying strong attention to many of the details in her life ("conscientious about trifles") were additional hallmarks of someone needing *Silica* as a constitutional remedy.

In a person like Lara, I often begin by prescribing a homeopathic remedy in a low potency with repeated doses (versus a single dose of a higher potency), so I asked her to take *Silica* 12c once a day for the next six weeks. I chose this dosing method because I wanted to lessen the possibility of any aggravation (i.e., temporary worsening of symptoms). Also, given the nature of Lara's health issues and the length of time she'd had them, I felt she might need to be taking this remedy for a long time to come; by starting low, we would have room to methodically increase the potency over time, if necessary. Finally, I chose repeated low doses instead of a single high dose because Lara is someone who thrives on routine and likes feeling that she is actively *doing something* for herself.

Natural immunity & the gut

To complement homeopathic treatment, I recommended some natural medicine approaches to help create a better immune system, starting right in the gut, from where so much of our immune system

Antibiotics for Acne?

They used to clear the skin, but now... not so much.

When a teenager's sebaceous glands kick in and clog up, normal skin bacteria can get trapped and multiply, leading to acne. That's why dermatologists frequently prescribe antibiotics to clear the skin. But the antibiotics have to be taken long-term, and, increasingly, the practice is coming under scrutiny. Acne-causing bacteria are mutating and becoming antibiotic-resistant—studies show a tripling of resistant bacteria over the last few decades—which means that antibiotics alone often don't work well anymore.

Even worse, some evidence shows that long-term antibiotic use puts people at increased risk of illness. For example, one study found that people who used antibiotics for acne were twice as likely to get upper respiratory infections than acne-sufferers who did not use antibiotics. Some researchers theorize that long-term antibiotic use alters the immune system. They are now racing to investigate other methods of treating acne—such as acne-fighting viruses called bacteriophages, according to the September-October 2012 edition of *mBio*, the journal of the American Society for Microbiology.

Thankfully, homeopathy has a long history of safely and effectively helping people with acne. Turn to it as your first resort!

—Sources: "Doctors Strike Mutating Bacteria in Teen Acne Battle," *NPR Blog*, October 15, 2012. "Good Viruses Will Fight Acne as 1915 Discovery is Revived," *Bloomberg Business Week*, October 10, 2012.



arises. I also recommended a few naturopathic approaches that work to kill infection and create healthier skin. (For details, see the sidebar, “Clear Skin, Naturally,” on page 18.)

Some people may ask, “If you give so many things at once, how will you know what’s working?” When I give a homeopathic remedy, I have a very clear idea of what I expect the remedy to do. In Lara’s case, yes, I expected the acne to improve, but I also expected a noticeable change in her overall well-being—that is, an

improvement in her energy level and her confidence, along with a decrease in her tendency to get sick. Would the botanical medicine and supplements also help? Yes. But I expected that after awhile on the regimen, and once improvement began, she could start tapering off the supplements.

Energized & excited

Indeed, when Lara returned to see me at the six-week follow-up visit, her skin looked remarkably better. There were no big cysts and no angry-looking areas. Her

entire chin and jaw were reddish, but there were no blemishes within the inflammation. More to the point, Lara felt energized and excited about life. She said she was now spending more time with her kids out and about, and she was feeling more and more confident. Given these great results—that is, she was moving in a positive direction with regard to her skin and her overall well-being—I decided not to change a thing in her treatment plan. So I asked her to continue taking the *Silica* 12c daily alongside the supplements.

Blemish-Busting Remedies

End the anguish of acne—
get homeopathic treatment!

Homeopathy for acne is different from conventional treatment in that a homeopathic remedy is individualized to the person. Because every person is different, no single homeopathic remedy will work for everyone. A remedy is selected based on a person’s unique set of symptoms, including (but not limited to) their acne symptoms.

For this reason, the curative remedy might be any one of hundreds of different possibilities—and that’s why it’s a good idea to seek the help of a homeopathic professional to heal your acne.

Below are just a few of the *many* possible remedies that homeopaths consider when treating a person with acne, along with very brief indications. (Many homeopaths advise low potency remedies in acne treatment, for example, 6c or 12c.)

Hepar sulph. Pimples that are very painful; they may feel like a splinter in the skin. Lesions are very sensitive to touch and possibly to cold. They may cluster in crops on the forehead and tend to form pustules and whiteheads easily. Discharge may smell like old cheese. In general, the person may be very chilly and oversensitive to pain, touch, cold, and slight causes.

Calcarea sulph. Severe cystic acne. Lesions persist in one place for weeks and do not heal quickly. Yellow, creamy pus drains for a long time. Unhealthy-looking skin with yellowish scabs. Pimples on face and near ears and hairline. Tendency to infections of the sinuses, ears, and tonsils that persist a long time. The person may be warm-blooded and feel worse in warm rooms. According to Lippe, this remedy “acts deeper than *Hepar sulph.*”

Kali bromatum. Acne begins in the teen years and continues relentlessly into adulthood. Bluish, red pustules on the face, chest, and shoulders that leave scars, purple spots, or a depression in the skin. Pimples may have a depressed center or be painful, large red cysts with a white or yellow center. In females, the acne may be worse near the menstrual period.



The person may have fidgety hands and feet, unpleasant dreams, restless sleep, and teeth grinding. They may be worse from warmth.

Pulsatilla. Acne in young girls that is associated with the onset of puberty. Acne that is associated with the menstrual period (especially when the period is irregular or absent) or with pregnancy. The person tends to have little thirst; to be weepy and like comfort and consolation; and to be chilly but like open, cool air and gentle motion.

Silica. Deep, hard cystic acne, like boils on the face, especially the cheeks; pimples often do not come to a head or show pus. Pimples are very slow to heal and leave pitting scars. The person tends to get infections easily and frequently. They may be chilly with sweaty hands and feet. They may be fatigued and lacking in strength and confidence, while also being obstinate with fixed ideas.

Sulphur. Acne with very oily skin. Blackheads are plentiful. Pimples and whiteheads are very large but not that deep. The face, especially the nose, is generally affected and tends to become reddened. Pimples may be painless but itchy. The skin may be rough and worse from washing. The acne may also be worse from heat, before the menstrual period, and from eating fatty foods. (This remedy is especially indicated for rosacea, a reddening of the face that causes acne-like eruptions.)

—Compiled by *Homeopathy Today* staff.

Complexion cleared!

At the three-month mark when Lara next came to see me, her skin was perfect. No bumps, no acne, no redness. "I cannot believe it... I absolutely cannot believe it could be this easy!" she said, "After all those years of getting nowhere and all the things I tried and all the nasty antibiotic side effects I put up with, I'd really thought it wasn't even possible to get help. I just can't believe my skin looks so good practically overnight!" At this point, I decided to give Lara one dose of *Silica* 30c and have her stop taking *Silica* 12c daily. Now that she was stronger and much improved, I felt she could handle that higher potency, and she was also ready to do one less thing per day. I recommended that she stay on her supplement regimen, though at reduced dosages and frequency.

Over the course of the ensuing year, I give Lara one dose of *Silica* 30c and eventually one dose of *Silica* 200c, at points when her improvement appeared to be plateauing. She weaned herself from the vitamin/mineral supplement and the flax/borage seed oil by the end of that first year. Her skin stayed clear and healthy



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looking, and her bowels were in good working order with little to no constipation—quite a welcome change for her. Lara had not had any bouts of sinusitis since we started working together either—a great sign that her immune system was stronger than before. I suggested that Lara stay on the probiotic for another year or so, as I wanted to help ensure that her immune system stayed strong (and we know that so much of our immune system arises from the gut).

Best face forward

It is now 8 years since I first saw Lara, and she simply no longer has acne. She could not be more thrilled. In sum, giving a constitutional homeopathic remedy shifted her tendency for acne, sinusitis, and constipation, which in turn allowed her more emotional freedom. It also helped to lift the fatigue she had labored under most of her life. Additionally, natural medicine approaches helped to correct a low-grade infection that had plagued her skin for so many years.

Lara has gone on to need different homeopathic remedies for a few acute ailments, and she occasionally receives a dose of *Silica*, when her fatigue creeps back, she feels out of sorts, or she develops a seemingly acute illness that's really just a manifestation of her underlying constitutional state. I was so happy to help this earnest woman to be able to put her best face forward and to feel that she can come

out into the world with more energy and confidence.

Homeopathy is an excellent therapy for treating people with cystic acne. In my experience, it works well to shift the tendency for having such dermatological conditions. Other natural medicine protocols can support this shift by giving the body the raw materials it needs to heal. I have treated numerous patients with severe cystic acne whose results were very similar to Lara's—complete healing in a relatively short time—and without the unpleasant and sometimes dangerous side effects of many of the conventional acne drugs. Some patients do take longer to heal, and for some the healing is not so complete; I've also had a handful of acne sufferers that, unfortunately, I have not helped. That said, I am always happy to work with acne patients toward the goal of healthy and blemish-free skin.



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