

Do Hydrocolloid Patches Work, and Which Acne Patches Are Best?

They're said to be a cure-all for zits, but are they *really*?

by **CHLOE METZGER** **SEP 16, 2021**

If I could show you a picture of my medicine cabinet right now (which, hey, become my BFF and I will), you'd see that I have an entire section dedicated to hydrocolloid patches—aka pimple patches. I've got your O.G., no-frills hydrocolloid patches (fondly referred to as the ~pus suckers~); I've got the pimple patches covered with the darts and needles and acids galore; and I've got the zit stickers that look like, well, stickers—neon stars, peace signs, hearts, etc. Because as anyone with hormonal acne knows, you can quite literally never be too prepared for whiteheads and breakouts.

But despite how ridiculously fast hydrocolloid patches rose to popularity, I've found that the majority of my friends don't really know how they work...or why the work... or if they even work at all. And it makes sense: If you use the wrong kind on the wrong type of pimple, you'll see zero results, which can turn you into a hater fast. And that's why I'm here today, to explain all things hydrocolloid patches, including the best ones to try right now. Keep reading, and get your zits ready.

What do hydrocolloid patches do?

Hydrocolloid (hydro-coal-oid) patches—aka pimple patches—are made from a moisture-absorbing material that's been used for decades in the medical community to help with wound healing. **“Hydrocolloid helps skin heal from the inside out in a moist environment, like the way it’s supposed to,”** says dermatologist Mona Gohara, MD, associate clinical professor at Yale University.

Basically, after you pop a pimple (shame!), stick on a hydrocolloid patch, and the material will gently absorb excess fluids, like pus and oil, from your popped pimple while also protecting the wound—yes, it's considered a wound—from bacteria, gunk, and your dirty little fingers. And because your zit can now heal in a somewhat “sterile,” moist environment—which is key for preventing scarring and speeding up healing time—**you'll be left with a flatter, less inflamed pimple by the time you take it off.**

So even though you 100 percent should not be popping or picking your zits, you probably still will (sigh), and that's where these patches come in. Stick one over your clean, totally dry skin and still-oozy pimple, then leave it on overnight. Peel it off in the morning, wash your skin, and slap on another patch if it's still oozy.

Why do hydrocolloid patches turn white?

Ah yes, the white stuff in the pimple patch. IMO, one of the most satisfying, gratifying parts about using pimple patches is seeing how much gunk they seem to pull out of your zit by the time you peel it off. Buuut here's a little *womp womp* news: **That white stuff you see on the patch isn't really pus from your zit—it's actually just moisture from your skin** (which, sure, can include some pus) turning the hydrocolloid patch white and gummy on the inside to help protect your wound.

Even though hydrocolloid patches will gently absorb seeping liquid from your skin—and eventually turn white—**they won't actually suck the gunk out from deep within your pore.** So if the zit you squeezed was a deep, inflamed zit (ugh), don't expect your pimple patch to work miracles in flattening your zit.

What are pimple patches vs. hydrocolloid patches?

Back in ~the day~ (aka a few years ago), the only pimple patches that existed were plain, semi-clear, hydrocolloid patches. Either you DIY'd your own by cutting dots from big sheets of hydrocolloid bandages—hi, me—or you managed to find pre-cut hydrocolloid patches online or from K-beauty shops. Eventually, hydrocolloid patches became known by their way cuter name of pimple patches...and they also evolved.

Since then, **pimple patches have morphed from their basic hydrocolloid beginnings to spot-treatment hybrids**, using acne-fighting ingredients (like salicylic acid, tea tree oil, glycolic acid, and niacinamide) to treat your pimple while also protecting it. And, nope, not all of these new types of pimple patches use hydrocolloid as their base material anymore.

Now, a lot of pimple patches will either have: (1) a layer of acne-treating ingredients on their sticky side to cover your zit in a targeted, won't-wipe-off-in-your-sleep spot treatment, or (2) microdarts, i.e., little needle-like darts made out of acne-treating ingredients that push very gently into your skin before dissolving.

Do hydrocolloid patches work on cystic acne?

Short answer: Nope, pimple patches don't work on cystic zits. Which is devastating, because cystic acne is the devil, and the world needs a topical/biblical cure.

Because **cystic zits are under-the-skin inflammation, the only quick treatment is a cortisone shot from your dermatologist**. Sadly, nothing topical is going to make its way deep into your pore to kill inflammation (not even the miracle-sounding microdart patches, since those darts don't *actually* pierce your skin, FYI).

Still, popping on an acne patch can't really hurt either. If, for example, you use a patch that's infused with salicylic acid or tea tree oil, it can help calm some inflammation while also preventing added irritation from you playing with the zit. Even regular, unmedicated hydrocolloid patches can be beneficial in helping you keep your hands off your face—they're a shield against your poking and pressing, both of which can further aggravate your cystic zit.

What pimple patch is best?

Honestly, it depends on the zit you're working with and your skin type. **If you're dealing with a traditional oozy, freshly popped zit, slap on a plain hydrocolloid patch** to help your body heal the wound fast, without further irritating it.

If you're working with any other zit (whiteheads, blind pimples, and, sure, cystic acne), try using a pimple-treating patch—either one with microdart technology (which, in my experience, tends to be a bit more aggressive in the adhesive department and not as gentle on super-sensitive skin), or one that's infused with spot-treating ingredients, like one of the below.

Regardless of which one you choose, they'll all help you keep your fingers off your face and give your zit time to heal on its own, without your interference.

Are there any risks to hydrocolloid or acne patches?

Thankfully, any potential risks are very, very low risk (unless, of course, you're allergic to one of the active ingredients, then please don't use them). **If you have super-sensitive skin like I do, though, the adhesive can be a bit irritating,** especially if you're wearing them overnight or back to back.

Example: I wore a microdart patch on my cystic zit for almost 24 hours straight this week, replacing it every eight hours with a new patch (when I washed my face or showered), and all the peeling and reapplying left a red ring around my zit—and now I have an even bigger red patch to cover up. Woo! This isn't the norm though, I just have very sensitive skin. Still, it's not a bad idea to give your face a breather (and a layer of lotion) between your patches to prevent irritation.

Bottom line: Acne patches really work.

...within reason. No, they won't get rid of your un-popped pimple overnight, and no, they also won't completely undo all the damage you inflicted during your skin-picking

session. But **they *can* help treat your zits, calm inflammation, speed up healing, and, most important, make you feel productive** in a situation where you're more or less waiting around for your body to do its thing. And that, as we all know, can be absolutely maddening.

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Chloe Metzger is the deputy beauty director at Cosmopolitan, obsessively writing about new makeup launches, the best hair products (curly girl here; whattup), and the skincare formulas that really work for every skin type ([follow her on Instagram](#) to see behind-the-scenes pics of that magazine life).