Blue light therapy for acne? [1]

Dear Alice,

I recently stumbled upon something called ANSR Beam on a blog talking about acne control. I've been trying to look into the blue light therapy it claims to use to help diminish acne, but am having a hard time finding any information about it. What is blue light therapy? Is it effective in treating acne? And would something like this at home blue light therapy be strong enough to be effective?

Answer

Dear Reader,

When it comes to your health, it's wise to consider your options and make sure you know the benefits and potential side effects of any new treatment or prescription. It's hard to generalize and say what will be effective as an acne treatment because each person and their skin is so unique. Additionally, there are different types of acne (more on those later). While blue light therapy devices can be effective, studies haven't compared them to other types of treatment. As a result, it's unclear whether they're more or less effective. ANSR Beam, which you mention, was a home device that combined blue and red light. ANSR Beam appears to no longer be available because the manufacturers weren't able to get clearance by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Keeping that in mind, there are some preliminary findings about various types of light therapy as a treatment for acne that hopefully can shed some “light,” no pun intended, on the topic.

Whether it's laser (light that's emitted in a single wavelength) or light (light that's emitted in multiple wavelengths) treatments, light therapy is used primarily to treat acne by either killing the bacteria Propionibacterium acnes (P. acnes), which is typically responsible for outbreaks, or damaging sebaceous glands in the skin, to reduce the production of excess sebum that contributes to acne.

Some different types of light therapy include:

- **Blue light therapy**: Uses only blue light
- **Photodynamic therapy (PDT)**: Uses a combination of blue light and photosensitizer cream or liquid
- **Photopneumatic therapy**: Uses a vacuum technique and both blue and red light
- **Pulsed light with heat energy**: Uses both light and heat

However, other FDA-cleared (not FDA-approved \[^2\]) home devices are available that use only blue light or a blue/red light combination for the treatment of acne. The directions described in the research seem simple — wash your face and direct the light at the targeted area of blemishes. Of the research studies that evaluated these devices, the majority of participants noted improved skin conditions and few side effects (such as skin redness and dryness). However, these studies also noted that the light therapy does seem limited to effectiveness with mild to moderate acne, and the improvement was only temporary. The home devices were also not compared to more conventional acne treatments, so it’s hard to say if light therapy is more or less effective than other options.

Clinical light therapy is becoming more common as an alternative when health care providers and patients don't see results with conventional treatments. For dermatological purposes, PDT is only FDA-approved for actinic keratosis (a type of scaly skin lesion), but some health care providers also use it to treat acne. In clinical trials of PDT and light therapy alone, effectiveness at treating mostly mild to moderate inflammatory (i.e., pimples or zits) or non-inflammatory acne (i.e., whiteheads and blackheads) was varied. Very few trials compared these therapies with over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription acne treatments. In the trials that did, several found no difference in effectiveness.

Another issue to consider with clinical light therapies is the side effects. For PDT and light therapy only, side effects include discomfort during the procedure, redness, swelling and some skin discoloration — all of which tend to clear up within hours (or up to three months for skin discoloration) with light therapy alone. However, PDT can be much more painful, so much so that many participants in clinical trials discontinued treatment and even stayed home from work or school. Patients who undergo PDT must also limit sun exposure for at least 48 hours after treatment. Depending on the individual, multiple sessions may be needed with either therapy.

Bottom line, it’s hard to tell if blue light therapy will work for you. You may want to consider your options with a health care provider or more specifically with a dermatologist who can evaluate your skin and discuss the pros and cons of options available to you. It’s often helpful to make a list of your questions and symptoms before your appointment so you have as much information as possible to make your decision about treatment.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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