

Itching



Everyone experiences itchy skin from time to time. But if you have itching that lasts for a long time, it can severely affect your quality of life and is usually a symptom of an illness. Itching that lasts for weeks, months, or even years can cause other problems, such as poor sleep, inability to concentrate, irritability, anxiety, or depression. The medical name for itching is ‘pruritus.’

Types of Itching

Although itching always feels like a skin problem—and always makes you want to scratch—it is actually a complex problem with many different causes. Some of the causes do come from skin diseases, like inflammation around sores or wounds, or from skin allergies like eczema. Sometimes itching comes from damaged nerve fibers or is a symptom of a disease such as chronic kidney failure or liver disease. Occasionally, it is caused by emotional problems.

Treatment

When itching is severe and long-lasting, you should talk with your doctor about it. He or she will probably suggest specific treatments. Your doctor will ask questions and examine you to find out the underlying cause. Often, when the underlying condition is treated, the symptom will go away. Symptom relief is the goal of treatment.

What May Help

The first step in treatment is to make sure that the skin stays as healthy as possible. Here are some simple things that may help:

- It’s important to try not to scratch, which can make the problem worse. Gently tap or rub the skin instead.
- To avoid scratching, keep fingernails short and wear gloves or mittens at night.

- Keep the itchy area cool. Wear light clothing and fabrics that allow air to circulate and reduce sweating in the area of the itch; cotton fabrics are usually preferable to wool or synthetics like polyester or nylon.
- Apply moisturizing lotion immediately after taking a lukewarm bath or shower.
- Adding a soothing product to a bath may help, like Burrow’s solution, oatmeal bath, baby oil or olive oil.
- Wrapping the itchy area in a cool wet towel may be helpful.
- Avoid perfumed soaps, bubble bath, and detergents, which can be irritating.

Topical Skin Treatments

Applying treatments directly to the skin, known as ‘topical’ treatments, is often recommended. The goal of a topical treatment is to help treat the cause of the itch, restore the health of the skin, and prevent further damage to the skin that may cause itching.

- Moisturizing creams and lotions are effective for reducing dryness and relieving the itch.
- Cooling agents, such as lotions or salves containing mint oil, menthol, camphor, or phenol, create the sensation of cold that reduces itching.
- Topical anesthetics that dull or reduce feeling in the skin may be purchased in the pharmacy or prescribed by your doctor; they are sprays or creams that usually contain lidocaine.

- Topical antihistamines also are available in the pharmacy and may be most likely to help when itching is due to an allergy; they are sprays or creams that may contain diphenhydramine (Benadryl®).
- Topical corticosteroids are strong anti-inflammatory creams that may be purchased over the counter in lower strengths or prescribed by your doctor in higher strengths.

Medications

There are many medications, such as antihistamine drugs (allergy pills), that may be prescribed for chronic itching. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist for advice about which to try.

Some prescription medications are also available to help. When itching is due to a specific disease, your doctor may prescribe a medicine that might help treat the cause. Some drugs that may be useful for itching are also often prescribed for pain, depression, or seizures.

If your doctor prescribes a drug for itch, take it as directed. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are also taking something you purchased over the counter at the pharmacy. And let your doctor know if a medicine is not working.

Other treatments for itching include:

- Light therapy (phototherapy)
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy (a type of psychotherapy)
- Meditation
- Relaxation/breathing exercises

Patient Education Series

Itching

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.