

# Itching

## What is itching?

Itching is an irritating feeling of the skin that makes you want to scratch your skin. It may be in just one part of your body or it may be all over your body.

## What causes it?

Itching can have many causes. Some well-known causes of itching are insect bites, sunburn, and poison ivy. These kinds of itching usually go away without treatment in a few days. Another common cause of itching is fungal infection, such as athlete's foot, but it often does not go away if it is not treated.

Itching may occur with or without a rash or other changes in the skin. When there is no rash, itching all over the body may be caused by physical or psychological problems, or by the environment. Itching may be a symptom of kidney, liver, or thyroid disease; diabetes; or lymphatic cancer. Itching can also be a symptom of an allergic reaction. Anxiety, severe depression, and other emotional stress can cause itching that typically goes away when the emotional problem is under control. Environmental conditions such as dry climates can cause excessive dry skin that may produce itching.

Itching can be a problem during pregnancy. For example, many pregnant women have itching in the belly area. This is usually caused by stretching of the skin as your belly grows larger. As your belly stretches, you may notice pink lines on your belly. These lines are called stretch marks. They can itch badly at times. If you itch all over and it is particularly bad in the palm of your hand and you just can't seem to scratch the itch satisfactorily, then you may have a condition called cholestasis of pregnancy. This condition requires special attention for you and your baby, so let your healthcare provider know about your symptoms right away. Unfortunately, the itching can be hard to treat.

## How is it treated?

Try not to scratch the itchy area. Scratching may relieve the itch, but it can cause more irritation and swelling. If scratching breaks the skin, it can cause an infection.

For relief from itching, try any of these measures:

- Press your hands firmly on the itchy area.
- Keep the area moist and cool. A cool washcloth works well.
- Try a cool, oatmeal bath product such as Aveeno.
- Put nonperfumed skin lotion on itchy areas. Use calamine lotion for rashes, especially on poison ivy, sumac, or oak rashes.
- Put a nonprescription 1% hydrocortisone ointment or cream on small itchy areas. Follow the directions on the package. Do not use hydrocortisone too

often. It can irritate the skin and actually make itching worse. Check with your healthcare provider before you use hydrocortisone on babies.

- Try a nonprescription oral antihistamine such as Benadryl, especially at bedtime. Use it according to the package instructions.
- Keep your fingernails short and wear gloves at night to keep from injuring the skin by scratching.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton clothing. Avoid scratchy, wool, and acrylic fabrics.
- Avoid getting hot and sweaty.

Itching caused by fungus infections such as athlete's foot and jock itch can be treated with antifungal powders and creams. Itching from lice can often be treated with anti-lice medicines.

Several medicines can be used to treat itching during pregnancy, including Benadryl, Atarax, or Tavist. However, as with any medicine during pregnancy, you should ask your healthcare provider for advice before you take these medicines.

Contact your healthcare provider if you have itching that lasts for several days without getting better. You may need tests to check for medical problems that may be causing the itching.

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