

Psoriasis

What is psoriasis?

Psoriasis is a common skin problem. It causes patches of thick, rough, dry buildup of the outer layer of skin. The thick areas of skin are called plaques. They usually occur on the scalp, elbows, knees, and buttocks, but they can develop anywhere on the skin.

People of all ages can have psoriasis. It is not contagious. It's a chronic disease, which means you will likely have it all of your life.

What is the cause?

When you have psoriasis, your outer layer of skin makes new cells more rapidly than normal. The extra cells become thick plaques. No one knows exactly what causes psoriasis, but most researchers believe it is an immune system disorder. The immune system is your body's defense against infection.

You are more likely to have psoriasis if members of your family have it.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are rough, dry, thick areas of skin. Often the skin under the plaques is slightly red. The skin may or may not itch.

Most psoriasis occurs in patches. Sometimes, however, it appears as many small, droplike, scaly areas. This is called guttate or raindrop psoriasis and it often occurs on the back.

Psoriasis can affect your fingernails and toenails, causing them to have pits or dents in them. In severe cases the nails become thick and misshapen.

A few people also have arthritis (joint pain) with psoriasis.

The symptoms of psoriasis can vary from mild to severe. They may worsen when you are upset, sick, or injured. Flare-ups of the problem may also occur when:

- You have a skin injury, such as a cut, burn, rash, or insect bite.
- You drink a lot of alcohol (more than 1 drink a day for women, more than 2 drinks for men).
- You have either very little exposure to sunlight or you have a severe sunburn.
- Your skin is exposed to constant friction, for example, from clothing.

The severity of the symptoms may change with the seasons. Psoriasis usually gets better when you spend more time out in the sun.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine your skin and nails. You may have a skin biopsy. The biopsy is done by removing a small sample of your skin after the area has been numbed with an

anesthetic. The tissue is examined in the lab to see if the problem is psoriasis or some other skin problem.

How is it treated?

Your treatment depends on your symptoms. The first goal is to ease discomfort and slow the production of skin cells to prevent or reduce the buildup of plaque. A second goal is to control the psoriasis for cosmetic reasons, especially for the areas of skin that are usually exposed when you are dressed for work, school, or formal occasions.

Your healthcare provider may recommend or prescribe a cream or ointment to rub on your skin.

More severe psoriasis may require medicines that help keep your immune system from overreacting and help stop the buildup of extra skin cells. You will need some monitoring with blood tests while you are using these medicines. Ask your healthcare provider if any of these medicines might be right for you.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe ultraviolet (UV) light therapy in addition to your medicines. New ways of using ultraviolet light to treat psoriasis include the use of lasers. At least 2 different types of lasers may be used.

- One type of laser emits a form of UV light in a very narrow beam. It usually takes 2 treatments a week for several weeks to improve or clear the plaque. The results may last for several months. You may get a mild sunburn from these treatments.
- The other type of laser is a pulsed dye laser. It uses a different kind of light than other psoriasis light treatments. It destroys the blood vessels beneath the psoriasis plaques and makes it less likely the plaques will return. Treatments are done in 15 to 30-minute sessions, usually about every 3 weeks. This laser can create a stinging feeling during the treatment. It takes several sessions to clear the plaque.

How can I take care of myself?

Here are some things you can do that might help you have fewer flare-ups:

- Try to avoid skin injuries. Plaques may develop in places where your skin has been injured. When you do hurt your skin, protect it from infection.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about getting the right amount of sun exposure for your skin.
- Avoid stress.
- Exercise daily according to your healthcare provider's recommendation and maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol.
- Follow your provider's recommendations for keeping your skin soft. Ask your provider to suggest soaps, lotions, and cosmetics.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results

- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

You can get more information from:

- American Academy of Dermatology
1-888-462-3376
<http://www.aad.org>.
- National Psoriasis Foundation
1-800-723-9166
<http://www.psoriasis.org>

How can I help prevent psoriasis?

Because the cause of psoriasis is not known, it's not yet possible to prevent it. However, you may be able to prevent serious outbreaks by treating small plaques when you first see them. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for treatment.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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