

Seborrheic Dermatitis

What is seborrheic dermatitis?

Seborrheic dermatitis is a skin condition that causes flaking of your skin. Most often you will have flaking on your scalp and face and behind your ears. Sometimes thick layers of scales form on your skin.

Another name for seborrheic dermatitis is seborrhea.

Seborrheic dermatitis is a common cause of dandruff, but dandruff can also be caused by flaking of dry skin that is not related to seborrhea.

What is the cause?

There is no one specific cause for seborrhea. Sometimes it happens when you have changes in your hormones, or if a certain type of fungus or yeast infects your skin. You are more likely to have seborrhea if you have Parkinson's disease or epilepsy.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms vary from mild to severe. The usual symptoms are flaking of dry skin from your scalp or a buildup of waxy dead skin behind your ear lobes. Often the skin on the middle of your forehead and on either side of your nose is red, especially in skin creases. You may also have flaking in these areas. Flaking or scaly skin may form on the eyelids at the base of the eyelashes and may be hard to wash away. The skin under and around thick layers of scales may be red.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Lab tests are usually not needed because most often seborrhea can be diagnosed with the skin exam. In some cases your skin might be tested for fungus, or you might have blood tests.

How is it treated?

Seborrhea often comes and goes and does not need treatment. Frequent shampooing with an anti-seborrhea shampoo can help prevent flare-ups.

If treatment is necessary, it is aimed at reducing the inflammation and buildup of yeast on your skin so that there is less scaling. The treatment depends on where the seborrhea is and how severe it is. If the seborrhea is on your scalp only, dandruff shampoo containing zinc or selenium may be all you need. Leave the shampoo on your hair for the amount of time recommended on the bottle before you rinse it out. Use the shampoo only as often as recommended. Your healthcare provider may recommend a prescription antifungal shampoo if other shampoos do not help. Be sure to follow the directions for use of any of these shampoos.

Treating the scalp with shampoo may also help the seborrhea rash on nearby areas of skin, such as the forehead and eyebrows. Do not use scalp shampoo around the eyes.

Steroid cream or lotion may be used to treat more severe cases of seborrhea on the scalp, sometimes in addition to dandruff shampoo. Mild steroid cream can also be put on the face to treat redness and flaking. To avoid side effects, including skin and eye damage, follow your healthcare provider's instructions when you use steroid cream. Using a steroid for a long time can have serious side effects. Use steroid medicine exactly as your healthcare provider prescribes. Don't use more or less of it than prescribed by your provider and don't use it longer than prescribed. Don't stop using a steroid without your provider's approval. You may have to lower your dosage slowly before stopping it.

Creams used for yeast infections are also sometimes prescribed to control seborrhea rash on the skin and scalp.

Sometimes seborrhea causes flaky skin to build up on the eyelids, especially at the base of the eyelashes. It may help to put a mixture of half no-tears shampoo and half water on the eyelids with a cotton swab every day.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's advice and instructions.

To help control dandruff, you may also try:

- Washing your hair every day with a gentle shampoo to see if this helps get rid of flakes and excess oil.
- Not putting a lot of styling products on your hair. Hair sprays, mousses, and gels may build up on your scalp and may make it oily.

Ask your provider 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.

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