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## Dermatology Patient Education

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# Pruritus (Itch)

Pruritus [proo-rye-tuh s] means itch or itching. Everyone gets an itch once in a while. Usually itch only lasts for a limited period of time and is often caused by annoyances like a mosquito bite or contact with something irritating, like scratchy fabric. Itching can be localized in one area or spread over multiple sites of the body.

If an itch lasts for more than 6 weeks it is considered a chronic itch, and is more likely to disrupt your life. Dermatologists are trained to evaluate and identify the cause of the itching.

It is especially important to tell your dermatologist if you have any of the following:

- An itchy rash
- A growth on your skin that itches
- Itching without an obvious reason
- Itching from head to toe that began suddenly
- An itch that is non-stop or disrupts your life (i.e. keeps you awake, makes concentrating difficult)
- Itching that causes you to feel anxious or depressed



Pruritus

### WHAT CAUSES ITCHING?

There are many reasons for itchy skin in both children and adults. Many skin diseases can begin with itch, such as eczema, hives, or psoriasis. Itch can be caused by a reaction to medications. The most common cause of itching in babies and children is eczema.

As people age, itch becomes a common complaint. Dry skin, often related to changes in weather or exposure to everyday things like cosmetics, soap and jewelry, can also cause itchy skin.

Itch can also be a sign of a contagious disease like scabies or ringworm. If you had chickenpox earlier in life, an itchy rash could be the first sign of shingles. Damage to nerve fibers after an outbreak of shingles can cause itch.

An itch may also be the first symptom of a disease occurring inside the body. Examples include kidney and liver disease, diabetes, and some cancers such as lymphoma.

The sooner these diseases are diagnosed and treated, the better the outcome.

## HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST DIAGNOSE PRURITUS?

To find out what is causing an itch, your dermatologist will look closely at your skin. Sometimes the cause is obvious to your doctor's trained eyes.

Your dermatologist may perform a physical exam and ask you some questions about your itch to try to pinpoint the cause. Your dermatologist may examine your skin with a special lighted magnifier, or scrape off a bit of skin so that this can be examined under a microscope. Ringworm, scabies, and other contagious diseases often require a skin scraping for diagnosis.

Sometimes a blood test or skin biopsy is necessary to be sure of the diagnosis. Your dermatologist can safely perform a skin biopsy during the office visit. If more information is needed to make an accurate diagnosis, additional medical testing may be necessary.

If your dermatologist suspects the cause is another disease, you may be referred to a specialized medical doctor for their input.

## HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST TREAT PRURITUS?

Treatment depends on what is causing the itch. In general, it is best to search for and treat the cause of the itch, rather than solely treat the itch.

If you have a skin condition that causes your itch, your dermatologist will prescribe medicine to treat the skin condition. This may include oral medications, shots, light therapies or medicine that you apply to the skin (e.g. steroid creams or ointments). For example, medications that work to decrease inflammation are effective for the itch associated with atopic dermatitis and psoriasis.

Your dermatologist may also recommend a home skin care regimen to help alleviate skin dryness, cracking, or peeling/flaking.

Oral antihistamines can effectively relieve itch in some skin conditions, particularly in the case of hives. However, it is important to note that these oral medications may cause excessive sleepiness. Depending on what is causing the itch, antihistamines may not be prescribed, as they are not helpful for all types of itch.

Sometimes, other treatments may include medications that target the nerves or neurotransmitters that are involved in itch. These include medications known as anti-epileptic/anti-seizure drugs or antidepressants.

## TIPS TO MANAGE ITCH

Treatment can take time to work. When your skin becomes unbearably itchy, these tips from dermatologists can bring more immediate relief:

- Apply a cold compress to the skin that itches.
- Moisturize your skin.
  - Choose a moisturizer that is free of additives, fragrances, and perfumes, and is in the form (e.g. cream, ointment, oils, gels and lotions) that you prefer and will use regularly.
- Take an oatmeal bath.
  - Oatmeal and other agents you can add to the bath can be very soothing especially for blisters or oozing skin due to chickenpox, hives, poison ivy, or sunburn.
- Use wet wraps.
  - A wet wrap which covers the skin with a damp cotton material, followed by a dry wrap, is often quite soothing, particularly to children with eczema.
- Apply cooling agents such as menthol or calamine.
- Apply topical anesthetics that contain lidocaine or pramoxine.
- Use analgesic products that contain topical capsaicin.
  - Topical capsaicin can be found in over-the-counter medications for muscle/joint pain or arthritis pain. These are particularly effective for itch that can occur following shingles. It can also be used for psoriasis and chronic kidney disease itch. It is important to note that applying capsaicin to itchy skin or skin that has cuts or scrapes due to itching can be painful.

## PREVENT ITCH FROM FLARING

While you are treating your skin, these tips can help prevent itchy skin from flaring:

- Use lukewarm, not hot, water when bathing and showering.
  - Use a non-irritating, fragrance-free, mild cleansing bar or body wash with a low pH (package will say “low pH”). Do not use soap.
- Dry your skin by gently patting it.
- As directed by your dermatologist, apply medications to the skin before moisturizing.
- Apply a fragrance-free moisturizing lotion, cream, or ointment immediately after bathing to all areas of your skin regardless of whether it has been treated or not with medication.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton clothes. Wool and other rough-feeling fabrics can irritate your skin, causing intense itching.
- Use a fragrance-free, dye-free laundry detergent to minimize irritants to the skin.
- Keep fingernails cut short to reduce the effects of scratching.
- Try to avoid extreme changes of temperature. Maintain a relatively cool, neutral humidity environment in your house.
- Use a humidifier during winter if you are prone to dry skin and eczema.
- Keep cool.
  - To cool down quickly, you should dress in layers. Lowering the thermostat as needed or taking a cool shower can also help.
- Reduce stress.

## TELL YOUR DERMATOLOGIST

If your itch does not go away with home treatment or prescribed medications, be sure to tell your dermatologist. Some people have more than one reason for itchy skin. Your dermatologist can work with you to find the cause and relieve your itching.

Ask your dermatologist about other patient advocacy organizations where you can find additional tips and resources available for specific types of itch. Be sure to reach out for help and education.

A board-certified dermatologist is a medical doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating the medical, surgical, and cosmetic conditions of the skin, hair and nails. To learn more or find a dermatologist in your area, visit [aad.org](http://aad.org) or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376).

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