Dermatology Patient Education

Seborrheic Dermatitis

Seborrheic dermatitis is a common skin disease that causes a red, scaly, itchy rash typically on the scalp, eyebrows, folds around mouth, and ears. Seborrheic dermatitis can last for years. It tends to clear and flare without warning. Treatment often is necessary to control it. For some people, seborrheic dermatitis clears without treatment.

WHO GETS SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS?

Seborrheic dermatitis affects people of all ages. It occurs most often in infants and older adults and in men more than women.

In most infants, the condition appears on the scalp and is commonly referred to as “cradle cap.” Cradle cap is harmless and is not contagious. Scaly, greasy patches form on your baby’s scalp. The patches can become thick and crusty. Cradle cap usually goes away on its own within a few months. In some infants, seborrheic dermatitis occurs in the diaper area. Parents may confuse it with other forms of diaper rash.

In older adults, seborrheic dermatitis can appear and disappear throughout the rest of your life. Flare-ups are common when the weather turns cold and dry, or when you experience a great deal of stress. Your seborrheic dermatitis may worsen in winter.

Seborrheic dermatitis

Seborrheic dermatitis is also more common in:

- People who have a family member with seborrheic dermatitis
- People who have oily skin or hair
- Patients with Parkinson’s disease or with HIV/AIDS

WHERE DOES SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS OCCUR ON THE BODY?

It most often occurs on the scalp, sides of the nose, eyebrows and between the eyebrows, ears, eyelids, and middle of the chest. Other sites may be involved, such as the belly button, buttocks, armpits, breasts, and groin.
WHAT CAUSES SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS?
Dermatologists believe that the presence of the yeast that lives on our skin and an excess release of oil from the skin contribute to seborrheic dermatitis. The excess oil from the skin serves as a food source for the yeast to grow. The yeast then causes inflammation (redness and swelling), irritation, scaling, and flaking. The yeast is present on everyone's skin, but only some people's bodies react to the yeast causing the rash.

Seborrheic dermatitis

HOW DO DERMATOLOGISTS DIAGNOSE SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS?
A dermatologist can diagnose seborrheic dermatitis by the way it looks and where it is on the body. If you have chronic (long-lasting) seborrheic dermatitis that does not respond to treatment, you may need laboratory tests to rule out another skin disease. This may include a skin biopsy, in which your dermatologist removes a small piece of the affected skin for study under a microscope.

HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST TREAT SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS?
There is no way to cure seborrheic dermatitis, but treatments can keep the skin clear while you use them. Seborrheic dermatitis may get better on its own, but often needs a treatment to improve it. There are over-the-counter treatments or prescription medicines from your dermatologist that can control it. Your dermatologist can tell you which medicine is best for your seborrheic dermatitis.

For infants with cradle cap, gentle shampooing with a mild shampoo can help. Parents may also apply a prescription medicine to the child's affected skin. In the diaper area, seborrheic dermatitis usually clears on its own. Your dermatologist may prescribe a medication for this area.
Adults often need to use a medicated shampoo, like an anti-dandruff shampoo. Your dermatologist may prescribe a topical corticosteroid or anti-fungal medication by itself or in combination. Long-term use of topical corticosteroids can cause side effects, so follow your dermatologist's advice on the proper use.
There are also oral antifungal medications and a non-steroidal, non-antifungal barrier cream available by prescription from your dermatologist. Immune system modifying creams can also be beneficial. Keep in mind though that even with treatment, seborrheic dermatitis can recur. For this reason, your dermatologist may prescribe a combination of several treatments to help you maintain clearer skin.

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 about seborrheic dermatitis or find a dermatologist in your area, visit aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376).