

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Ringworm on the body

Ringworm is a skin infection. Despite the name, it has nothing to do with worms. It's caused by a fungus that's a lot like the one that causes athlete's foot.

What is ringworm?

You get ringworm if a fungus infects your skin. You can pick up the fungus in several ways. An infected person can pass the fungi on to someone else through close contact. Or fungi can be spread through touching personal items, such as a comb, towels or bedding. You can also catch ringworm from contact with an infected animal. Dogs and cats can get ringworm, and so can some farm animals, such as cows.

Ringworm tends to affect smooth patches of skin without much hair on them. It's more common in children than adults. Ringworm can also affect the groin. Groin ringworm is particularly common in men and teenage boys who play lots of sport. Ringworm can also affect the scalp, but this is treated differently to ringworm on the body.

What are the symptoms?

Ringworm usually starts as a red, scaly spot. This spreads outwards over time. The rash is often itchy. The centre of the rash may start to clear up, making a ring shape. This is how ringworm gets its name.

Ringworm that affects the groin has slightly different symptoms. Instead of a ring-shaped rash, it tends to cause a large patch of red skin around the crease at the top of your thighs.

What treatments work?

An antifungal cream will cure ringworm for most people. But, if you have severe ringworm or large areas of skin are affected, your doctor may suggest taking tablets instead.

There are also things you can do yourself to reduce the risk of spreading ringworm to others, and to stop it coming back.

Medicines for ringworm

You can buy several **antifungal creams** from a pharmacist. Examples include clotrimazole (brand name Canesten AF cream), ketoconazole (Nizoral), miconazole (Daktarin), and terbinafine (Lamisil). Some of these creams are advertised as treatments for athlete's foot. You can also use them for ringworm.

Groin or body ringworm starts to clear up for about 8 in 10 people when they use an antifungal cream. In studies, not many people got side effects. But a few people get skin irritation from using creams.

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It's important to follow the instructions that come with your treatment. You may need to apply the cream several times a day, and keep using it for a while after the rash has disappeared. If your rash doesn't start to improve after using a cream for a week or two, see your doctor.

Doctors sometimes prescribe a cream that combines an antifungal drug and a **steroid**. The steroid helps with inflammation while the antifungal gets rid of the infection. But steroids aren't used on their own, because they hide the symptoms of ringworm without treating the infection.

If you have severe ringworm, or you've tried a cream and it hasn't worked, your doctor may prescribe **antifungal tablets**. These include griseofulvin, fluconazole (brand name Diflucan), itraconazole (Sporanox), and terbinafine (Lamisil). You may need to take tablets for several weeks.

In studies, between 6 in 10 and 9 in 10 people were completely cured after taking antifungal tablets. But this treatment can cause side effects. Some people feel sick or get stomach pain. In one study, about 4 in 100 people got side effects from fluconazole tablets.

Antifungal tablets can cause liver damage, but this is rare. In a review of the research looking at over 1,000 children taking antifungal tablets, there were no reports of serious liver problems. However, if serious liver damage does happen, it can be dangerous.

Doctors are careful about prescribing antifungal drugs to women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Griseofulvin isn't suitable for men who are planning to father children in the near future.

Stopping ringworm spreading or coming back

If you have ringworm, **keep the skin around the infection clean and dry**. Some doctors recommend covering small patches of ringworm with a plaster. Make sure you wash your towels, clothes and bedding regularly. If you have groin ringworm, wear loose cotton underwear, such as boxer shorts.

Ringworm can be itchy, but **try not to scratch**. Scratching could break the skin and cause another infection, or you could spread fungi around your body on your fingers.

If you have athlete's foot as well as ringworm, treat it at the same time. Fungi from your feet can spread to other parts of your body and give you ringworm again.

If you think a pet has ringworm, take it to the vet. Ringworm on animals usually looks like a bald patch on their fur. If you don't have your pet treated, you could catch ringworm again.

What will happen to me?

Ringworm can be cured with treatment. But without treatment, the infection can last a long time. It doesn't usually go away on its own.

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