

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Scalp ringworm

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

What is scalp ringworm?

You get ringworm if a fungus infects your skin. Fungal infections can affect any part of your body. When they affect the scalp, they tend to cause patches of hair loss. Scalp ringworm is particularly common in children, although adults can get it too.

Children can pick up a fungal infection 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. Children 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.

What are the symptoms?

When ringworm affects a smooth patch of skin, it can cause a ring-shaped rash. This is how it gets its name. But scalp ringworm's symptoms are slightly different. Scalp ringworm causes patches of hair loss. The skin in these patches may look grey or be covered in black dots. The dots are hairs that have broken off.

Children with scalp ringworm may also have a flaky scalp that looks like bad dandruff. Your child's scalp may itch, or even be quite sore. Severe ringworm of the scalp can turn into a tender, inflamed area called a **kerion**.

Doctors sometimes do laboratory tests on scalp ringworm, by brushing or scraping some flakes of skin from your child's scalp. But most doctors suggest making a start on treatment early, without waiting for the laboratory results.

What treatments work?

Scalp ringworm needs treating with antifungal tablets. There are also some steps you can take to stop your child spreading ringworm to anyone else.

Drug treatments

Antifungal tablets work well for scalp ringworm. In some studies, more than 9 in 10 children are cured after treatment. But antifungal tablets can take a month to work, or even longer.

There are several medicines that your doctor may prescribe. These include griseofulvin, fluconazole (brand name Diflucan), itraconazole (Sporanox), and terbinafine (Lamisil). Griseofulvin used to be the standard treatment for scalp ringworm, but newer drugs, such as terbinafine, work more quickly.

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Antifungal tablets can cause side effects, although these weren't common in most studies. Some people felt sick or got stomach pain, headaches or a rash.

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 sometimes recommend **steroid creams or tablets** as an extra treatment for severe, inflamed ringworm on the scalp (a kerion). Steroids help reduce inflammation, so the idea is to make the area less tender and reduce the chance of scarring. But there's not much research on whether this works.

Steroids can cause serious side effects when they're used for a long time. But side effects are less likely in the short term. If your child gets any worrying symptoms while taking steroids, take him or her to a doctor straight away.

Stopping ringworm spreading or coming back

Although ringworm can spread from person to person, children don't usually need to stay off school once they've started treatment. Some doctors recommend using an antifungal shampoo to stop ringworm spreading. A shampoo won't cure scalp ringworm on its own, but it may help reduce the amount of fungi on your child's scalp.

Your child **shouldn't share towels, bedding, hats, combs or hairbrushes**. Make sure you wash towels, clothes and bedding regularly. To stop your child getting infected again after treatment, wash their combs and brushes with a disinfectant, such as diluted bleach.

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, your child could catch ringworm again.

What will happen?

Ringworm can be cured with treatment. But without treatment, the infection can last a long time. It's important that your child gets treatment, as severe scalp ringworm could cause a bald patch on his or her scalp.

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