

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Psoriasis

If you get red patches on your skin covered with silvery scales, you may have psoriasis. Although there's no cure for psoriasis, there are treatments that can help keep it under control.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about psoriasis to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What happens?

Your skin is made up of several layers of cells. All the time, new cells are being made to replace the older ones. The new cells move from the inside to the outside of your skin. When they reach the surface of your skin, the cells fall off. This turnover of skin cells usually takes three to four weeks.

But if you have psoriasis, this happens much faster. The new skin cells take only three or four days to reach the surface. The extra cells build up and make flaky patches on the surface of the skin. Sometimes the extra cells cause bad dandruff on the scalp.

Doctors aren't sure why this happens to some people. The genes you get from your parents may play a part. Being under stress also may make psoriasis flare up.

You can get different types of psoriasis. Here we look only at chronic plaque psoriasis. We don't look at treatments for nail or scalp psoriasis, or other kinds.

Psoriasis is not catching. So you can't give it to anyone else.

What are the symptoms?

Patches of psoriasis are red and covered with silvery scales. They have clear edges separating them from the surrounding skin. They can be different shapes and sizes. The patches may be itchy. Sometimes the patches split and bleed.

Your skin patches will probably come and go. They may go on for months, or never really go away. Some people have only a couple of patches at a time. But others have lots of patches all over their body.

You may also get some of these symptoms if you have chronic plaque psoriasis:

- Changes to your nails. Your nails may look pitted, or separate from the nail bed. This happens to about a third of people with psoriasis
- Painful, stiff joints (arthritis). This happens to up to 1 in 10 people with psoriasis. It usually affects the joints at the ends of your fingers and toes.

What treatments work?

Your treatment will depend on how bad your psoriasis is. You may need to try a few before you find the one that works for you.

Creams and ointments

There are many different creams and ointments for psoriasis that work well. If your psoriasis is mild, a cream or ointment may be all the treatment you need.

- **Vitamin D** creams are easy to use and less messy than some other treatments. Creams include calcipotriol (brand name Dovonex), calcitriol (Silkis) and tacalcitol (Curatoderm). A new treatment combines a strong steroid with calcipotriol (Dovobet).
- A **vitamin A** gel called tazarotene (brand name Zorac) can keep psoriasis under control. But it can irritate the normal skin around your psoriasis patches. If you are a woman, don't use this if you're pregnant.
- **Moisturisers** help to keep your skin supple and moist. Some of them contain white soft paraffin, similar to Vaseline. Some brand names are Diprobase, E45 cream, Oilatum and Unguentum M.
- **Dithranol cream** also can help, but it can stain your skin and clothing, and irritate your skin. The brand names for the cream are Dithrocream and Micanol.
- **Steroid creams** work when used for short periods. But if you use them for a long time, they can make your skin thinner. And your psoriasis might flare up when you stop using them. You can buy low-dose steroid creams from a pharmacy. But it's best to talk to your doctor about this treatment. They can give you advice on using steroids and prescribe stronger creams if you need them. Brand names for stronger steroid creams include Betnovate, Dioderm and Locoid.
- **Salicylic acid** can loosen and 'lift' the scales of psoriasis from your skin or scalp. But there's not enough research to say for sure whether this helps.
- **Coal tar creams and ointments** have been used for many years to treat psoriasis. They can be messy and stain your clothing.

Light treatment

- **Sunlight** helps some people with psoriasis. But if you go out in the sun, it's important to make sure you don't burn. Use sunscreen to protect parts of your skin that aren't affected by psoriasis. A hat and sunglasses are also a good idea.
- Your doctor may suggest **ultraviolet B (UVB)** light treatment if creams and ointments haven't worked, or if you have lots of scattered patches of psoriasis. Doctors agree this treatment works, but there hasn't been much research to show this. You have UVB treatment in a machine that's a bit like a sunbed. Each treatment takes only a few minutes.
- If you have severe psoriasis, doctors agree that taking a drug called psoralen and having treatment with ultraviolet A (UVA) light can help you. This treatment is called **PUVA** for short. But there is a risk your skin will age faster if you have this treatment

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for a long time. It also increases your risk of getting a type of skin cancer called squamous cell cancer.

Drugs for psoriasis

Several drugs can help with psoriasis, but they can cause serious side effects. Some of them weaken your immune system. If you're a woman, you shouldn't get pregnant while taking these drugs. They can harm your baby. And if you're a man, you may be advised not to get your partner pregnant while taking some of these drugs. Because of the side effects, doctors only tend to suggest these drugs if other treatments haven't worked.

Drugs used for psoriasis include:

- **Acitretin** (Neotigason)
- **Adalimumab** (Humira)
- **Ciclosporin** (Neoral)
- **Etanercept** (Enbrel)
- **Infliximab** (Remicade)
- **Methotrexate**.

Combined treatments

Your doctor may suggest a combination of treatments for psoriasis. For example, you may use creams or take medicine at the same time as having light treatment. The research shows that some combinations work better than the individual treatments on their own. But you may get side effects from both of your treatments.

Other treatments

Some people try other kinds of treatments to improve their skin, such as acupuncture, thermal bath (balneotherapy), fish oil supplements and psychotherapy. But there hasn't been much research to show whether any of them work.

What will happen to me?

Psoriasis doesn't usually go away completely, although you may find it comes and goes. It isn't dangerous, and chronic plaque psoriasis isn't likely to affect your general health. Most people can control their symptoms with treatment.

For most people with psoriasis, the main problem is that they feel upset about the way their skin looks. Some people find it hard to do things like swimming. Some stop going out socially.

It might help to know that hundreds of thousands of people have this condition, and many of them have the same feelings about it. Although there is no cure for psoriasis, this condition can be controlled. And you can live life the way you want to.

Where to get more help

Coping with psoriasis from day to day can get you down. It might help to talk to other people who have the condition. The Psoriasis Association (<http://www.psoriasis-association.org.uk>) can put you in touch with local groups, and offer advice and support.

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