

Patient information from BMJ

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Dermatitis (seborrheic) of the body

Dermatitis means inflammation of the skin. There are several types of dermatitis. The kind described here affects parts of the skin where there are creases, such as around your mouth and nose, or where you have hair, such as your eyebrows. It's called seborrheic dermatitis.

When this type of dermatitis affects the scalp it is more commonly called dandruff. This information deals only with seborrheic dermatitis on the body.

We've brought together the best research about seborrheic dermatitis and weighed up the evidence about how to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is seborrheic dermatitis?

If you have seborrheic dermatitis you get inflamed or flaky skin. The inflamed skin is usually on parts of your body that have hair, or where there are folds or creases in your skin. These are the areas of skin with lots of **sebaceous glands**. These glands make oil to lubricate your skin.

We're not really sure why seborrheic dermatitis happens to some people and not to others. Some types of yeast grow naturally on oily parts of the body. It might be that some people's immune systems are particularly sensitive to yeasts, and this may play a part in causing seborrheic dermatitis.

Your immune system is your body's defence against infection. If your immune system overreacts to something it can cause irritation.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of seborrheic dermatitis is irritated or flaky skin. The flakes may be greasy and are often white or yellowish. Irritated patches of skin look a little like sunburn.

This type of dermatitis tends to affect the face and nose, especially between your nose and the corners of your mouth. It may also affect your eyebrows, ears, chest, armpits, or groin. It can also affect your scalp and cause severe dandruff (see our separate information on dandruff).

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Skin affected by dermatitis may be itchy. Try not to scratch too much, as you could break the skin and cause an infection.

What treatments work?

Although seborrheic dermatitis isn't usually harmful you may not like the way it looks or feels. Fortunately treatment can help control the symptoms.

The first thing to remember is to keep the affected areas of your skin clean and as dry as possible.

The two main treatments for seborrheic dermatitis are **antifungal creams** and **steroid creams** that you apply to your skin. These are often used separately, but doctors sometimes prescribe both together.

Steroid creams (the full name of this type of steroid is corticosteroid) work by reducing inflammation of the skin. For dermatitis on the face or on creased skin you should use a gentle (low-potency) steroid cream. Your doctor can advise you about how to use these creams.

Steroids do have side effects in some people, but using a steroid cream for a short time shouldn't cause serious problems. Possible side effects include thinning of your skin and slight changes of skin color. If you're using a steroid cream on your face, make sure you keep it out of your eyes.

Antifungal creams can help clear up dermatitis by killing yeasts that grow on the skin.

Some people find that antifungal treatments irritate their skin. If this happens to you, talk to your doctor about trying a different treatment. You should be careful that antifungal creams don't get in your eyes. If this happens, wash out your eyes thoroughly with plenty of water.

Other treatments

Creams that calm down your immune system, called **calcineurin inhibitors**, can be used to reduce the inflammation in your skin. They don't work as well as steroid creams but specialists sometimes recommend them for people who have skin thinning caused by steroid cream. Long-term use of this treatment has been linked to cancer, so doctors are cautious about prescribing it.

If your dermatitis is widespread and creams don't work, your doctor might suggest **antifungal pills**. But they aren't used much, as they can cause serious side effects.

What will happen to me?

For many people seborrheic dermatitis comes and goes over time. You might find you need to have more treatment from time to time, or you might need to try different treatments. Some treatments can be used regularly, to help stop dermatitis coming back. Ask your doctor or pharmacist how often you should be using your treatment.

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Some people find that their dermatitis gets worse when they're feeling stressed or not sleeping properly. Dermatitis can get worse in winter and start to clear up in the summer, possibly because getting more sunlight helps.

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