

# Psoriasis

**Psoriasis is a common skin condition that affects people of all ages. It is an immune system disorder that causes skin cells to build up on the surface of the skin. There is no known cure for psoriasis, but it can be well controlled.**

The cause of psoriasis is not known. The risk of developing psoriasis can be inherited, but the likelihood of developing psoriasis also seems to be influenced by other factors.

## Signs and symptoms

The symptoms of psoriasis vary from person to person but often include:

- Red, scaly patches (plaques) on the scalp, elbows, knees and other parts of the body
- Silvery-white scales of skin which shed or flake
- Dry, cracked skin that may bleed
- Itching and soreness.

Psoriasis tends to come and go throughout life. Symptoms of psoriasis

can be very mild, and often people only have a few small patches at a time. However, symptoms can sometimes get worse (flare up). Some people also develop a form of arthritis known as psoriatic arthritis which causes swollen and stiff joints.

## Common types of psoriasis

There are a number of different types of psoriasis. The most common types are:

### Chronic plaque psoriasis

This is the most common form of psoriasis. Red patches covered with scale (plaques) form most often on the elbows, knees and lower back. Smooth red patches can also appear in body folds (e.g. armpit, under breasts)

and/or the genital area. This is called flexural psoriasis.

### **Nail psoriasis**

Psoriasis can affect the fingernails, and sometimes the toenails. It can occur on its own or along with skin patches. Small pits (or dents) about the size of a pinhead form on the nails. The nails can become an orange-yellow colour, loosen and crumble, and lift off the nail bed.

### **Scalp psoriasis**

Scaly patches develop on the scalp and may extend onto the hairline.

Scalp psoriasis can look like severe dandruff, and may also cause hair loss. It can occur on its own or along with other types of psoriasis.

## **Treatment**

Psoriasis is treated with medicated creams or ointments (topical therapy), phototherapy or other medicines that work inside the body (systemic therapy). Treatments are often used in combination.

Psoriasis is a chronic (long-lasting) condition. Many people need long term treatment to control their symptoms and prevent flare-ups. The choice of treatment depends on the area of the body affected and whether the symptoms are mild or severe.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice about psoriasis and its treatment.

### **Skin moisturisers**

It is important to moisturise the skin. Plenty of moisturiser applied at least

twice a day, especially after bathing, helps to soften plaques, reduce cracking and scaling of the skin, and relieve itch.

### **Vitamin D-based treatment**

Calcipotriol is a vitamin D-based treatment used for plaque psoriasis. It works by slowing the rate at which skin cells are produced. It can take up to six weeks of treatment before there is a noticeable improvement in symptoms. Calcipotriol can cause skin irritation in some people but it is safe to use long-term. It is available in a cream, ointment, and scalp lotion and gel (e.g. *Daivonex*, *Daivobet*) on prescription from a doctor.

### **Corticosteroids**

Can relieve the skin inflammation of psoriasis. There is a range of corticosteroid creams, ointments and lotions available. Hydrocortisone (mild potency) and clobetasone (moderate potency) are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. More potent products must be prescribed by a doctor.

### **Salicylic acid**

Helps to reduce scaling by removing dead skin cells. It is available as an ointment, lotion and medicated shampoo from a pharmacist without a prescription. They can irritate the skin, and should not be used by people allergic to aspirin. Other treatments can work better if the scale is removed first by salicylic acid.

## Coal tar preparations

Coal tar can relieve itch and skin inflammation, and reduce scaling. It is available as an ointment, lotion, gel and medicated shampoo from a pharmacist without a prescription. They can have an unpleasant smell, and stain clothes. They can also irritate the skin.

## Dithranol

Is used in some topical treatments for psoriasis plaques to slow down the production of new skin cells. It can be very effective but is irritating to normal skin and can stain clothes.

## Vitamin A derivatives

Tazarotene (e.g. *Zorac*) is available as a cream for treatment of plaque psoriasis. It helps to slow down the production of new skin cells. It can cause skin irritation and make the skin more sensitive to sunlight.

## Phototherapy

Phototherapy (light therapy) uses artificial ultraviolet (UV) radiation to improve the symptoms of psoriasis. Therapy is used two or three times a week for several weeks.

## Systemic treatments

If topical treatments and/or phototherapy are unsuccessful, or symptoms are severe, systemic medicines may be prescribed by a doctor. These medicines block the immune system response that causes psoriasis. There are a range of treatments used including tablets/capsules and injections.

## Important

Read and follow instructions for psoriasis products carefully.

Seek medical attention promptly if you:

- Develop a painful, red rash on large areas of the body with peeling or blistering of the skin.
- Also develop a fever.
- Also have joint pain or swelling.

## Self care

There are many factors which can trigger or worsen psoriasis including stress, smoking, being overweight, drinking large amounts of alcohol, and injury to the skin (e.g. from scratching or sunburn). Avoiding these factors can help to control the symptoms of psoriasis.

To care for your skin:

- Avoid using soaps. These can be drying and irritate the skin. Use a soap substitute. Ask a pharmacist about suitable cleansers
- Don't smoke
- Don't drink large amounts of alcohol (more than 2 standard drinks per day)
- Maintain a healthy weight with a well-balanced diet and regular exercise
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to manage stress
- Ask your pharmacist or doctor about medicines which can worsen or trigger psoriasis
- Avoid scratching. Keep fingernails and toenails short and use protective gloves at night.

## For more information

### **Psoriasis Australia**

Phone: 03 9813 8080

Website: [www.psoriasisaustralia.org.au](http://www.psoriasisaustralia.org.au)

### **New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc**

Website: [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **NPS: Better choices, Better health**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

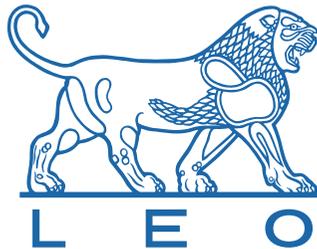
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Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.*

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