

PSORIASIS EXPLAINED

Psoriasis is a common, non-contagious and distressing scalp complaint. Varying in severity, it is caused when skin cells reproduce too quickly. Usually skin renews itself every 28 days, but psoriasis sufferers have a much faster turnover of skin cells – around every four days. The condition is characterised by red, scaly, raised patches of dead skin known as ‘plaques’. These patches, which vary in size from a few millimetres to several centimetres across, can fall off, often leaving small areas of scalp bleeding. Some sufferers also experience itching.



WHERE DOES IT APPEAR?

Plaque psoriasis, the most prevalent form, can appear almost anywhere on the body although most frequently on the elbows, knees and scalp. Most common amongst those with fair skin in Europe and the USA, around 2% of the population is affected by psoriasis at some stage. Men and women are troubled equally, and although psoriasis can begin at any age it most often occurs between the ages of 5-9 years in girls and 15-19 years in boys. However, adults between 57 and 60 years old can also experience their first attack (psoriasis is regularly mistaken for eczema in the elderly).



WHAT TRIGGERS IT?

Psoriasis has a tendency to run in families although the exact cause remains unknown for certain. Particular situations do seem more likely to trigger a flare-up including:

- **Illness (especially a streptococcal infection – a familiar cause of sore throats and tonsillitis)**
- **Infection**
- **Emotional stress**
- **Side effects to some medication**
- **Hormonal factors such as puberty and menopause**
- **Sun exposure (although ultraviolet light can be very beneficial to the majority of sufferers)**

HOW CAN IT BE TREATED?

For some, psoriasis will simply disappear on its own. For the rest of sufferers the good news is that treatments have vastly improved in the past few years and more help is therefore available to help slow down the rate of skin cell formulation and ease some of the discomfort. The most popular treatments include emollients, vitamin D-based creams, coal tar preparations, steroid ointments or creams and phytotherapy (UV light therapy). As psoriasis has also been linked to problems with the metabolism of essential fatty acids (EFAs), dietary changes and nutritional supplements can also help significantly. Treatment of psoriasis also depends on the severity of the condition. Mild cases can usually be cleared with the use of the creams and tars mentioned above. However, treatment of more severe cases needs care and patience. Removal of the scales is time consuming and has to be done gently in order to avoid scalp damage.

At My Hairdoctor we often soften the scales and then remove them gently using coal tar creams and salicylic acid under a warm steamer. Such treatments can often bring relief but repeat treatments are always necessary. In fact, psoriasis often improves in the summer months when there is greater exposure to UV rays.

DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

Some sufferers experience significant relief from the main symptoms of psoriasis – itching, scaling and redness – by taking specific supplements:

- **Omega-3 fish oils (a rich source of EFAs, which are essential for good skin health) can significantly help to reduce lesions. A daily dose of around 3000mg is recommended. Flax or linseed oils are a good alternative to fish oils for vegetarians.**
- **Evening primrose oil may also ease symptoms in some sufferers: try 2000mg daily over an eight week period.**
- **Antioxidants including beta-carotene and vitamins C and E, can help boost your immune system to prevent illness and help you fight infection better, two of the key triggers.**
- **Available as either a tincture or capsule, research has linked the herb Echinacea to anti-inflammatory and wound-healing properties.**
- **Studies have shown that specific combinations of Chinese herbs may significantly improve some types of psoriasis and eczema.**

HAIRCARE ADVICE

Gentle, non-irritating haircare can greatly help to minimise the discomfort of psoriasis:

- **As with any skin condition, avoid using soap or perfumed shampoos**

DID YOU KNOW?

Diet can play a major role in helping to control symptoms. Ideally, psoriasis sufferers should avoid 'trans' fats, artificial trans-fatty acids created by food processing that interfere with the way EFAs work within the body. It's therefore best to aim for a 'clean food' diet, which avoids processed foods wherever possible. It may also be useful to cut back on saturated fats found in red meats, dairy products (in particular cheese) and eggs, as well as refined sugars found in biscuits and cakes, plus wheat gluten. Instead, boost your intake of oily fish as they are an excellent source of omega-3. Some practitioners suggest taking milk thistle and artichoke extracts to help improve liver function too.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

These are useful to bookmark as they tend to offer balanced and credible viewpoints, backed with detailed peer-reviewed research on all kinds of health and beauty myths:

The Psoriasis Association

Dick Coles House, 2 Queensbridge, Northampton NN4 7BF

Tel: 0845 676 0076

www.psoriasis-association.org.uk

Skin Care Campaign

Hill House, Highgate Hill, London N19 5NA

Tel: 0207 281 3553

www.skincarecampaign.org

The British Association of Dermatologists

William House, 4 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 5HQ

Tel: 0207 383 0266

www.bad.org.uk

The Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine

Office 5, 1 Exeter Street, Norwich NR2 4QB

Tel: 0160 362 3994

www.rchm.co.uk

The National Institute of Medical Herbalists

Elm House, 54 Mary Arches Street, Exeter EX4 3BA

Tel: 0139 242 6022

www.nimh.org.uk