CONDITION

Intertrigo

Intertrigo is an irritated, inflamed rash that develops where skin surfaces rub together and trap moisture.

WHAT IT IS
Inflammation where moist skin surfaces rub together

BODY SYSTEM
Skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Redness, soreness, itching, burning

WHAT CAUSES IT
Moisture, heat, and friction in skin folds

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Skin examination, sometimes scrapings or cultures

MAIN TREATMENT
Moisture control, skin barriers, and infection treatment

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes, usually clears when triggers are controlled

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes, with fever or rapidly spreading redness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Often clears but may return in moist folds

Overview

Intertrigo is inflammation that develops where two skin surfaces touch. It is common in warm, moist folds, such as beneath the breasts, in the groin, between the buttocks, under the abdomen, or between the toes.

Moisture softens the outer layer of skin. Repeated rubbing then damages this protective barrier. The area may become red or darker than the surrounding skin, sore, itchy, or cracked.

Intertrigo itself is not contagious. However, damaged, damp skin can allow yeast, fungi, or bacteria to grow. A secondary infection may make the rash more painful, cause an unpleasant smell, or stop it from healing.

The condition can affect people of any age. It may clear after the skin is kept dry and

protected, but it can return if moisture and friction continue.

Symptoms

Intertrigo usually affects both sides of a skin fold. The two touching surfaces may look similar.

Symptoms can include:

Inflammation may be less visibly red on brown or black skin. Changes in colour, texture, warmth, or comfort may be more noticeable. Darker or lighter patches can remain after the active rash has settled.

Certain changes can suggest a secondary infection, although appearance alone cannot always identify the cause. A Candida yeast infection may cause a bright or moist rash with small spots or bumps around its edge. Bacterial infection can cause increasing pain, pus, crusting, warmth, swelling, or a strong smell.

Intertrigo can resemble other skin conditions. These include contact dermatitis, which is a reaction to an irritant or allergen; psoriasis in skin folds; fungal infections such as ringworm; and erythrasma, a bacterial condition that causes well-defined brown or reddish patches.

- Red, pink, brown, purple, or darker skin, depending on skin tone
- Burning, itching, tenderness, or stinging
- Damp, softened, or peeling skin
- Cracks, small raw areas, or bleeding
- An unpleasant smell if infection is present

Causes and risk factors

Intertrigo develops through a combination of moisture, warmth, limited airflow, and friction. Sweat, urine, stool, or fluid from a wound can keep the skin damp. Skin-to-skin rubbing then weakens the surface.

Some body shapes naturally create deeper folds. Having a larger body can increase the number or depth of folds, but intertrigo is not a sign of poor hygiene and can occur at any weight.

Other factors that can make intertrigo more likely include:

Babies can develop intertrigo in the neck, armpits, groin, or diaper area. Older adults and people who need help with washing, drying, or changing position may also be more vulnerable.

Yeast and bacteria are usually secondary causes rather than the original trigger. Candida yeast grows well in warm, damp places. Bacteria associated with infected intertrigo can include staphylococci, streptococci, and Corynebacterium .

- Hot or humid weather
- Heavy sweating
- Tight clothing or non-breathable fabrics
- Limited movement or spending long periods in bed
- Incontinence
- A limb difference, brace, splint, or medical device that traps moisture
- Diabetes, especially when blood sugar is not well controlled
- A weakened immune system

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional can often identify intertrigo by examining the location and pattern of the rash. They may ask when it began, whether it is painful or itchy, what makes it worse, and which skin products or treatments have been used.

Testing is not always necessary. If infection is possible, a sample may be taken from the skin.

A gentle skin scraping can be examined with potassium hydroxide, often called a KOH test, to look for yeast or fungus. A swab or culture may help identify bacteria. A Wood lamp, which shines ultraviolet light onto the skin, can sometimes help detect erythrasma.

If the rash keeps returning, does not respond as expected, or has an unusual appearance, further assessment may be needed. Rarely, a small skin sample called a biopsy is taken to rule out another condition. Testing for diabetes may be considered when symptoms or medical history suggest it.

Treatment and management

Treatment aims to reduce moisture and friction, protect the damaged skin, and treat any secondary infection.

Gently wash the area and pat it completely dry. Rubbing with a towel can worsen irritation. A hair dryer on a cool setting may help dry a difficult-to-reach fold, provided it is held away from the skin.

Loose, breathable clothing can improve airflow. Clean gauze, soft moisture-wicking fabric, or another suitable material may sometimes be used to separate touching skin surfaces. It should be changed when damp and should not be packed tightly into the fold.

A barrier product can protect skin from sweat, urine, or repeated rubbing. Examples include products based on zinc oxide or petrolatum. A healthcare professional or pharmacist can help identify an appropriate option, particularly for broken skin or a rash near the genitals.

Medication depends on the cause. Antifungal treatment may be used when yeast or another fungus is confirmed or strongly suspected. Antibiotic or antiseptic treatment may be needed for a bacterial infection.

A mild anti-inflammatory cream may occasionally be recommended for a short period. Strong steroid like prednisone or hydrocortisone creams, or prolonged use of steroids in skin folds, can thin the skin and may hide or worsen an infection. Steroid cream should not be used as the only treatment for a suspected fungal rash unless a healthcare professional has advised it.

Avoid repeatedly trying several medicated products without guidance. Some creams, fragrances, antiseptics, and home remedies can cause contact dermatitis and make the rash harder to assess.

If sweating, incontinence, a medical device, or limited movement contributes to the problem, managing that factor is an important part of treatment. This may involve suitable continence care, changes in positioning, or checking the fit of a brace or prosthesis.

Complications

The main complication is secondary infection. Broken skin gives yeast and bacteria an easier route into the surface layers.

A bacterial infection can occasionally spread into deeper skin, causing cellulitis. Signs include expanding redness or discolouration, warmth, swelling, worsening pain, and sometimes fever. Cellulitis needs prompt medical treatment.

Long-lasting inflammation can cause painful splits, bleeding, or skin thickening. Healing may leave temporary or persistent changes in skin colour.

Repeated episodes can affect sleep, movement, exercise, sexual comfort, and confidence. An ongoing rash may also mean that another condition, such as psoriasis, fungal infection, or contact dermatitis, has been mistaken for intertrigo.

Prevention

Intertrigo cannot always be prevented. Natural skin folds, hot weather, limited movement, and some health conditions may continue to create warmth and moisture.

You may be able to reduce episodes by:

If a particular activity causes heavy sweating, washing and drying the affected folds afterward may help. Avoid vigorous scrubbing, which can damage the skin barrier.

If body weight is contributing to deep, painful folds, gradual weight management may reduce friction for some people. This is not a quick treatment, and intertrigo can still occur at any body size.

Good management of diabetes may reduce the chance of recurrent yeast or bacterial infection. Do not stop prescribed medicines or make major treatment changes solely because of a skin rash.

- Drying skin folds carefully after washing or sweating
- Changing damp clothing, underwear, socks, or dressings promptly
- Choosing breathable clothing that does not rub
- Using an appropriate barrier product on areas exposed to moisture
- Separating touching surfaces with clean, dry, soft material
- Managing incontinence with suitable products and regular skin care

Living with it and what to expect

Uncomplicated intertrigo often improves once the area is dry, protected, and exposed to less friction. Improvement may begin within days, but damaged skin can take longer to fully recover. Infection may extend the healing time and require specific treatment.

Some people have only one episode during hot weather, illness, or a period of reduced movement. Others have repeated flares in the same folds over months or years. Recurrence is more likely when sweating, incontinence, deep folds, or rubbing remain difficult to control.

A simple routine can make repeat episodes easier to manage. Notice which areas become damp, dry them gently, and reduce rubbing before the skin becomes raw. Check folds regularly if reduced sensation or limited movement makes discomfort harder to notice.

Colour changes may remain after pain, moisture, and inflammation have resolved. This does not always mean that infection is still present. However, persistent soreness, spreading changes, or repeated breakdown should be assessed.

Intertrigo does not usually limit a person's long-term activities. Finding practical ways to control moisture and friction can reduce discomfort and help protect the skin.

When to get medical help

Arrange routine medical advice if:

Seek prompt same-day care for rapidly increasing pain, warmth, swelling, or spreading redness or discolouration. These changes may indicate a bacterial infection.

Seek urgent or emergency care if a rapidly spreading rash occurs with fever, chills, confusion, faintness, severe weakness, or red streaks extending away from the area. Severe pain that seems greater than the visible skin changes also needs urgent assessment.

- The rash does not improve with gentle drying and skin protection
- It keeps returning or the cause is uncertain
- There is cracking, bleeding, pus, crusting, or a strong smell
- Over-the-counter treatment has not helped
- The rash involves a baby, a medical device site, or a large area
- You have diabetes, poor circulation, or a weakened immune system

Common questions

Is intertrigo contagious?

Intertrigo caused by moisture and friction is not contagious. Some secondary fungal or bacterial infections can spread through close contact or shared items, although many come from organisms already living on the skin.

Is intertrigo a fungal infection?

Not always. Intertrigo begins as inflammation in a warm, damp skin fold. Yeast or fungus may then infect the damaged area. Bacteria can also cause a secondary infection.

What does intertrigo look like?

It often appears as matching areas of inflammation on both sides of a fold. The skin may be red, brown, purple, shiny, damp, cracked, or peeling. Small spots around the edge can occur with Candida, but an examination or test may be needed to confirm the cause.

Can I use antifungal cream for intertrigo?

Antifungal treatment helps when yeast or fungus is involved, but it will not treat every cause. A persistent, painful, or uncertain rash should be assessed rather than repeatedly treated with different creams.

Does intertrigo smell?

It can. Trapped sweat, damaged skin, yeast, or bacteria may cause an unpleasant smell. A new strong smell together with pain, discharge, or spreading inflammation may indicate infection.

Why does my intertrigo keep coming back?

Repeated episodes usually mean that moisture and friction are continuing or that an infection or another skin condition has not been fully identified. Diabetes, heavy sweating, incontinence, limited movement, and deep folds can also contribute.

Sources

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