SYMPTOM

Itchy skin

Itchy skin is an uncomfortable urge to scratch that may affect one area or the whole body.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
An irritating tickle, crawling feeling, or urge to scratch

WHERE IT IS FELT
One area or anywhere on the skin

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Dry skin, eczema, contact irritation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Trouble breathing or swelling of lips, tongue, or throat

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to months, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, severe, widespread, or disrupting sleep

Overview

Itchy skin is an uncomfortable feeling that makes you want to scratch. The medical term is pruritus . It can affect a small patch or most of your body.

Your skin may look dry, red, bumpy, or cracked. Sometimes it looks normal even when the itch is strong. Scratching can briefly relieve the feeling, but repeated scratching may damage the skin and make itching worse.

Many cases are caused by dry or irritated skin. Eczema, allergies, insect bites, infections, medicines, and some health conditions can also cause itching. The location, appearance, timing, and other symptoms can help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

Itching may feel like a tickle, burning, stinging, or something crawling on the skin. It can come and go or remain present for long periods. Heat, sweating, stress, or certain fabrics may make it worse.

You may notice:

Repeated scratching may lead to open sores or infection. Signs of infection include increasing pain, warmth, swelling, pus, or redness that is spreading.

- Dry, rough, flaky, or cracked skin
- Redness, swelling, spots, bumps, or blisters
- Raised, itchy welts called hives
- Scratch marks, bleeding, or thickened skin
- Itching that is worse at night
- Itching without a visible rash

Common causes

Dry skin is a frequent cause, especially in cold weather, heated rooms, or after long, hot showers. The skin may look flaky or feel tight.

Eczema causes inflamed, itchy skin. It may appear dry, cracked, scaly, or darker or lighter than the surrounding skin. It often affects skin folds but can occur anywhere.

Contact dermatitis happens when something touching your skin causes irritation or an allergic reaction. Possible triggers include soaps, fragrances, cleaning products, cosmetics, metals, plants, and adhesives.

Insect bites and stings can cause small, itchy, swollen areas. Hives can appear after an allergic reaction, infection, temperature change, or pressure on the skin. Sometimes no trigger is found.

Skin infections can also itch. These include fungal infections, such as ringworm, and infestations such as scabies. Scabies often causes intense nighttime itching and small bumps, commonly between the fingers, around the wrists, waist, or groin. Other people in the household may also itch.

Less commonly, widespread itching without a clear rash may be related to a medicine or a condition affecting the liver, kidneys, thyroid, blood, or nerves. This does not mean that a serious condition is likely, but persistent unexplained itching should be assessed.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if itching occurs with trouble breathing, faintness, or swelling of your lips, tongue, mouth, or throat. These may be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

Seek same-day medical advice if:

If you are pregnant, contact your maternity team promptly about new widespread itching, especially if it affects your palms or soles, is worse at night, or occurs without a rash.

Book a routine appointment if the itching lasts more than a few weeks, keeps returning, affects most of your body, disrupts sleep, or has no clear cause. You should also arrange an appointment if self-care is not helping or scratching has damaged your skin.

- A rash is rapidly spreading, painful, blistering, or peeling
- A rash affects your eyes, mouth, or genitals
- You have fever or feel very unwell with the rash
- The skin is increasingly painful, hot, swollen, or leaking pus
- Itching began after a new medicine and you also have a widespread rash
- Your skin or eyes look yellow, especially with dark urine or pale stools

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when the itching began, where it occurs, and whether anyone close to you has similar symptoms. They may ask about new medicines, skin products, travel, pets, work exposures, allergies, and existing health conditions.

They will usually examine your skin, including areas that may not itch. The pattern and appearance can help identify eczema, hives, contact reactions, fungal infections, or scabies.

Tests are not always needed. If itching is widespread, persistent, or present without a rash, blood tests may be considered. These can look for problems involving blood cells, iron levels, the liver, kidneys, or thyroid. A sample of skin or a small scraping may sometimes be tested for infection.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. While the skin heals, these steps may reduce irritation:

A pharmacist can advise whether a cream or antihistamine like cetirizine or loratadine may be suitable. Antihistamines are more likely to help itching caused by hives than itching from dry skin or eczema. Some can cause drowsiness and may affect driving or other activities.

Avoid using medicated creams for long periods without advice. Some products can irritate the skin or hide signs of infection. Treatment prescribed for a specific cause may include

anti-inflammatory creams for eczema, antifungal medicine, or treatment for scabies. If scabies is confirmed, close contacts may need treatment at the same time.

- Apply an unperfumed moisturiser regularly, especially after washing
- Take short, lukewarm showers or baths instead of hot ones
- Use gentle, fragrance-free cleansers and laundry products
- Wear loose cotton clothing and avoid rough fabrics
- Keep your nails short and press or pat rather than scratch
- Hold a cool, damp cloth against the itchy area
- Keep the bedroom cool if itching is worse at night

What to expect

Itching caused by mild dryness or irritation may improve within days after avoiding the trigger and moisturising regularly. Insect bites and short-lived hives often settle as the reaction fades.

Eczema and other long-term skin conditions may improve and then flare again. Learning your triggers and following a treatment plan can help reduce these episodes.

Persistent itching can disturb sleep and mood. Scratching may create an itch-scratch cycle in which damaged skin becomes even itchier. Seek follow-up if treatment is not working, the rash changes, or new symptoms appear.

Common questions

Can itchy skin spread to other people?

The itching itself is not contagious. Most causes, including dry skin, eczema, and allergies, cannot spread. Some infections and scabies can pass between people through close contact or shared items.

Why is itching often worse at night?

Warmth, dry skin, and having fewer distractions can make itching more noticeable. Some conditions, including eczema and scabies, may also be especially itchy at night.

Can skin itch without a rash?

Yes. Dryness may cause itching before visible changes appear. Medicines, nerve irritation, and some internal health conditions can also cause itching without a clear rash.

Should I avoid scratching completely?

Try to limit scratching because it can damage the skin. Cooling the area, applying moisturiser, keeping nails short, or gently pressing the skin may provide relief with less injury.

Sources

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