SYMPTOM

Skin rash

A skin rash is a change in the skin's colour, texture, or appearance

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Itchy, sore, bumpy, scaly, or simply different

WHERE IT IS FELT
One area or anywhere on the body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Contact dermatitis, eczema, viral infections

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Rash with fever, blistering, facial swelling, or breathing trouble

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, recurring, spreading, painful, or affecting sleep

Overview

A skin rash is a visible or noticeable change in your skin. It may affect its colour, texture, temperature, or comfort. A rash can appear in one small area, cover several areas, or spread across much of the body.

Rashes have many possible causes. These include irritation, allergies, eczema, infections, medicines, heat, and immune system conditions. The pattern and location may offer clues, but appearance alone is not always enough to identify the cause.

Many rashes are mild and improve with simple care. Some need a routine medical appointment, while a rash with breathing difficulty, severe skin pain, blistering, or other serious symptoms needs urgent help.

What it may feel or look like

A rash may look different depending on your natural skin tone. Redness may be bright red on lighter skin but look purple, brown, grey, or darker than nearby skin on deeper skin tones. Changes in texture, warmth, swelling, and tenderness can be as important as colour.

You may notice:

Some rashes cause no discomfort. Others come with fever, tiredness, joint pain, a sore throat, or feeling generally unwell. These extra symptoms can help a healthcare professional work out the cause.

- Itching, burning, stinging, soreness, or pain
- Flat patches, raised bumps, welts, spots, or fluid-filled blisters
- Dry, cracked, rough, thickened, or scaly skin
- Swelling, warmth, crusting, weeping, or peeling
- A pattern shaped like rings, lines, or a band
- Changes limited to skin folds, exposed areas, or one side

Common causes

Irritation and contact dermatitis are common causes. Contact dermatitis means inflammation after the skin touches an irritant or something that triggers an allergic reaction. Possible triggers include soap, detergent, fragrances, cosmetics, metals, plants, gloves, and workplace chemicals. The rash often appears where contact occurred.

Eczema can cause itchy, dry, cracked, or inflamed skin. It may come and go. Heat, dry weather, irritants, stress, and skin infections can make it worse.

Heat, sweat, and friction may lead to small bumps or sore, irritated patches. These often occur beneath tight clothing or in skin folds.

Infections can also cause rashes. Viral illnesses may produce widespread spots or patches, sometimes with fever or cold-like symptoms. Fungal infections often cause scaly, itchy areas and may form a ring. Bacterial infections can cause warmth, swelling, tenderness, crusting, or drainage.

Hives are raised, itchy welts that can change shape, disappear, and return elsewhere. They may follow an infection, food, medicine, insect sting, temperature change, or another trigger. Sometimes no trigger is found.

Less common causes include psoriasis, autoimmune conditions, reactions to sunlight, and inflammation of small blood vessels. A new medicine can also cause a rash, even if you have taken it for several days or weeks.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if a rash comes with:

These may be signs of a serious allergic reaction or another emergency.

Seek urgent medical care the same day if the rash:

Book a routine appointment if the rash lasts more than a few weeks, keeps returning, spreads gradually, disturbs sleep, or does not improve with basic care. You should also arrange an assessment if you are unsure what triggered it or it may be linked to work, medicines, or a long-term skin condition.

- Trouble breathing, wheezing, faintness, or tightness in the throat
- Rapid swelling of the lips, tongue, face, or throat
- Severe weakness, confusion, or difficulty waking
- Is painful, rapidly spreading, blistering, or causing skin to peel
- Comes with fever and you feel very unwell
- Affects the eyes, mouth, or genitals
- Looks like purple or dark spots that do not fade when pressed
- Appears after starting a medicine and is widespread or worsening
- Has increasing warmth, swelling, pain, pus, or red streaks
- Occurs in a newborn or in someone with a weakened immune system

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the rash began, where it started, how it changed, and whether it itches or hurts. They may ask about fever, illness, travel, insect bites, sexual contact, new medicines, and recent changes in soaps, cosmetics, clothing, or work exposures.

They will examine the rash's colour, texture, edges, distribution, and whether it fades when pressed. They may also check your mouth, nails, scalp, or other skin areas.

Tests are not always needed. Depending on the suspected cause, testing may include a skin scraping for fungus, a swab for infection, blood tests, allergy patch testing, or a small skin sample called a biopsy.

Photographs showing how the rash changes can be useful. Bring a current list of medicines, supplements, and skin products to your appointment.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. A treatment that helps one rash may irritate or hide another, so avoid using several medicated products at once when the cause is unclear.

For a mild rash, you can:

A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription antihistamine or mild steroid cream may be suitable. Some antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine cause drowsiness. Steroid like prednisone or hydrocortisone creams should not be used on the face, genitals, broken skin, or a possible infection unless a healthcare professional advises it.

Do not stop a prescribed medicine solely because a rash appears. Contact the prescriber promptly for advice. Seek urgent help if the rash is widespread, blistering, painful, or accompanied by facial swelling, breathing trouble, or feeling very unwell.

- Wash gently with lukewarm water and a fragrance-free cleanser
- Apply a plain, fragrance-free moisturiser
- Use a cool compress for itching or discomfort
- Wear loose, breathable clothing
- Avoid scratching and keep fingernails short
- Stop any new cosmetic or skin product that may be responsible

What to expect

A rash caused by heat or brief irritation may settle within hours or days after the trigger is removed. Contact dermatitis, eczema, and infections may take longer and can return if the trigger remains or treatment is incomplete.

As a rash heals, itching and roughness may improve before the colour returns to normal. Temporary lighter or darker marks can remain, especially after inflammation or scratching.

If the rash is worsening rather than settling, new symptoms appear, or the original diagnosis no longer seems to fit, arrange another assessment.

Common questions

Is every itchy rash an allergy?

No. Itching can occur with dry skin, eczema, fungal infections, insect bites, hives, medicine

reactions, and several other conditions.

Can stress cause a rash?

Stress can trigger or worsen hives, eczema, and some other skin conditions. It should not automatically be assumed to be the cause of a new rash.

Is a rash contagious?

Some infectious rashes can spread to other people, but eczema, psoriasis, contact dermatitis, and most allergic rashes are not contagious. Until the cause is known, avoid sharing towels and wash your hands after touching the area.

Should I take a photograph?

Yes. A clear photograph in natural light can record changes, especially if the rash comes and goes. Include one close view and one showing where it is on the body.

Sources

- National Health Service. "Rashes in babies and children" and "Hives." NHS health information, reviewed 2023-2024.
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- DermNet New Zealand. "Skin rashes in children," "Contact dermatitis," and "Drug eruptions." DermNet clinical reference.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "About Group A Strep Infection" and guidance on skin infection warning signs.
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "Anaphylaxis." Health information on symptoms requiring emergency care.