

What You Should Know About Psoriasis

A former advertising slogan, “the heartbreak of psoriasis,” describes the emotional distress that you may experience while living with this chronic skin condition. An estimated 7 million people in the United States are painfully aware of the consequences of this disorder, which is not only physically uncomfortable but also often debilitating. Occurring primarily in adults, psoriasis is a permanent condition—one that flares up and goes into remission. There are many ways, however, for you to successfully manage your condition and reduce the severity and number of outbreaks.

What Is Psoriasis?

Psoriasis is a skin disorder that appears as unsightly scaling and inflammation. It is also considered an immune-mediated disorder in which out-of-control skin cells grow rapidly and pile up, instead of the normal shedding and regeneration process. These clumps of accumulated skin cells often appear as raw, red patches with silvery scales.

The presence of psoriasis may make life’s simplest tasks—walking, sleeping, and taking care of personal hygiene—painfully difficult, if not impossible, for you at times. For many people, it is a time consuming and very visible problem in their lives. Severe psoriasis may affect your life-style choices, such as dating, engaging in social activities, or pursuing a more high profile career. In addition, the medical costs and amount of time this condition requires may ham-

per your performance at work or school.

Depending on the intensity of your symptoms and the percentage of your skin affected, a clinician will categorize your psoriasis condition as mild, moderate, or severe. Treatment options are prescribed in relation to the intensity of the symptoms and how you respond to treatment. Different types of psoriasis exist and include:

Plaque psoriasis.—red lesions with silvery scales

Guttate psoriasis.—small, pear-shaped lesions often appearing after a bacterial infection such as strep throat

Pustular psoriasis.—noninfectious pus blisters that may be triggered by medication, stress, or infection

Inverse psoriasis.—red patches appearing in the folds of skin, often under breasts, near genitals, or in the armpits

Erythrodermic psoriasis.—overall redness and scaling that may be due to sunburn or medication

Psoriatic arthritis.—joint inflammation that feels like arthritis.

What Causes Psoriasis?

Medical experts don’t know what causes psoriasis. There is a widespread belief that the immune system is a fac-

tor in the predisposition for this condition. Research has led to a theory that the T cells (a type of white blood cell) within the immune system promote abnormal growth activity by causing the release of molecules called cytokines, which spark the inflammation and pile up of skin cells.

But why did you get psoriasis? Clinicians believe certain people are predisposed to developing this skin condition. Studies conducted on patients and their family histories indicate that psoriasis appears to be an inherited trait, although this is not always the case.

Environmental triggers may cause psoriasis to occur in certain individuals. Colder climates, for example, may encourage the condition to emerge. Infections, such as strep throat, can increase the likelihood of a flare-up. Also, psoriasis may worsen in the winter months due to the lack of beneficial ultraviolet sunlight. Ingested medications, including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications and blood pressure medications (specifically beta-blockers) or psychotropic drugs (lithium) have been found to introduce outbreaks of psoriasis. Perhaps the most prevalent trigger is the presence of emotional and physical stress. Learning to manage stress within your life may help reduce the number of outbreaks or the severity of the symptoms.

It is difficult living with psoriasis. People who are ignorant about this disease can be unintentionally cruel in their actions or statements. *If you find you are struggling with negative feelings as a result of having psoriasis, you should seek counseling.* Your physician should be able to refer you to the appropriate

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Psoriasis

professional. Counseling for psoriasis sufferers is often suggested as a coping mechanism and tool to prevent additional outbreaks.

What Are The Symptoms?

Psoriasis can vary in the severity of its symptoms. The majority of sufferers endure the telltale red plaque-like patches that are accompanied by scales. Typically affected areas may include the elbows or knees. Nails are another common area in which psoriasis may become visible. Symptoms may include indentations in the nail beds, yellowish discoloration in the toenails, or partial separation of the nail from the nail bed.

Mild forms usually appear as a red area on a small percentage of the body. Scratching the skin, including the scalp, can lead to visible bloody scabs. The more severe forms encompass a larger percentage of the body afflicted. Psoriatic arthritis may also be associated with the more serious forms of psoriasis and causes painful joint swelling as well as limited range of motion.

Is It Contagious?

Probably the most widespread misconception about psoriasis is the “fear of catching something.” *This skin condition in any form, no matter how severe, is not contagious.* You cannot “catch” psoriasis, nor can you pass it on through contact.

Can I Do Anything To Prevent Psoriasis?

No one is sure why psoriasis occurs and there is no known cure. However, once the condition originates, individuals should consult their health care provider and develop a proactive maintenance program to decrease the likelihood of reoccurrences.

How Can I Find Out If I Have Psoriasis?

Determining if you have psoriasis is essential to proper management of this

condition. Clinicians often have difficulty diagnosing psoriasis since it can look like several other skin disorders. In some cases, a doctor may recommend a skin biopsy, to help pinpoint the condition. Consult with your physician if you have any of the following conditions:

- Red, raised patches that have silvery scales
- Thick, crusted patches on your scalp
- Pits or discoloration in the nails, nail separation, or skin debris under the nail bed
- Evidence of a bacterial skin infection, pain, pus, or fever.

If I Already Have Psoriasis, What Can Be Done To Treat It?

Skin care—keeping it moist—is the primary goal for psoriasis treatment. Depending on the severity of the problem, different options or even a combination of choices may be suggested. In most cases, a variety of treatments are more effective than one method.

Bath solutions and moisturizers—thick and greasy—may be comforting, but rarely do they suffice as long-term solutions. Applying topical therapies, both moisturizers and prescribed ointments, is the most common way to treat mild psoriasis. Topical products such as corticosteroids, vitamin D₃ analogues, retinoids, coal tar, or anthralin, may bring you much needed relief.

Therapies involving sunlight or ultraviolet phototherapy are often prescribed as well. Natural sunlight or ultraviolet phototherapy can help reduce the pain and appearance of psoriasis. Be careful not to overdo your exposure to sunlight, however, since sunburns may cause psoriasis to flare up and become more noticeable.

Oral medications or systemic therapies such as methotrexate, retinoids, cyclosporine, and others, may help the severe psoriasis sufferer find relief. For the most pronounced cases, creams, phototherapy, and oral medications may be combined for the best results.

Your physician will prescribe a personal plan for you based on your symptoms and your response to treatment.

Some psoriasis patients employ additional, alternative therapies to treat this skin condition. These methods may involve seawater (climotherapy), natural sunlight, herbs, vitamins, diet, or stress reduction.

While being treated for psoriasis, it is important to consult your doctor if your symptoms change or increase in severity. Be sure to contact your health care provider if:

- You have severe psoriasis that has flared up and you currently have another illness
- You are taking medication for psoriasis and experience serious side effects, such as vomiting, bloody diarrhea, or fever.

Treatment options for psoriasis are continually improving as scientific advances develop. The most exciting trend has been seen within the group of drugs referred to as “biologics,” which are naturally derived proteins that, once injected into the body, seem to help in addressing moderate and severe psoriasis. All treatments may have potential side effects that should be discussed with your doctor, particularly if you are or are contemplating becoming pregnant.

If you have psoriasis, most likely you will be managing this condition for the rest of your life. Consult your clinician regularly to discuss rotation of treatment options in order to improve the effectiveness and reduce the side effects.

Resources

National Psoriasis Foundation
<http://www.psoriasis.org>

Psoriasis Support
<http://www.psoriasisupport.com>