Managing Itch

The word “psoriasis” originates from the Greek word “psora”, meaning “to itch”. The itch of psoriasis may have a bigger impact on quality of life than the visible effect of the disease. However, treating psoriasis also can profoundly improve the symptoms and your ability to cope with psoriasis on a day-to-day basis.

Itching explained

Psoriatic itch is different than that of other skin disorders. Some people have described it as burning, biting, stinging, or tingling. Itch affects up to 90 percent of people with psoriasis, and is the most troublesome symptom, according to a study by the National Psoriasis Foundation.

People with psoriasis can have itch even in places without lesions. Itch typically occurs when something external touches the skin, irritating itch receptors. Those receptors transmit a signal to the brain via the spinal cord, which triggers the desire to scratch. Scratching provides temporary relief by interrupting the itch signal. But for people with psoriasis, scratching tends to only make the problem worse in the long run. Scratching can over-activate nerve fibers, amplifying itch and intensifying the urge to scratch. Scratching can trigger the Koebner phenomenon, in which new plaques form on healthy skin as a response to skin trauma.

Stop itching before it starts

The goal in treating psoriatic itch is to inhibit the itch-scratch cycle and alleviate the itch, even before the clearance of visible lesions. Biologic drugs approved for the treatment of psoriasis, such as Enbrel (etanercept), Humira (adalimumab), Remicade (infliximab), and Stelara (ustekinumab), can be effective and work faster than topical treatments because they have a central effect in the brain that reduces itch activation and improves mood. Health care providers must tailor treatment to each individual’s response and according to the intensity of itch and the area of the body involved. Individuals can also become resistant to medications after repeated use and, for many, the best treatment strategy for itch may involve combining two or more therapies.

Proven methods that can reduce stress and improve emotional wellbeing can also be utilized as treatment strategies for itch. These include relaxation exercises, yoga, cognitive behavioral therapy, and mindfulness meditation. Posters on the National Psoriasis Foundation Facebook page testify that distractions also can help. Many say that activities such as drawing, painting, or dancing help take their minds off the itch.

At-home remedies

The following are ways people with psoriasis help relieve itch and pain:

- **Keep skin moisturized.** This is the first step in controlling itch because it reduces redness and itching and helps the skin heal. Dermatologists recommend heavy creams and ointments to lock water into the skin. Cooking oils and even shortening can be economical substitutes for commercial moisturizers.
- **Minimize scale and flaking.** Apply a scale softening (keratolytic) product to reduce excess skin and prevent psoriasis plaques from cracking and flaking.

- **Cold showers and cold packs also can offer relief.** Avoid bathing in very warm water and try to limit showers to 10 minutes or less. Hot water can exacerbate skin irritation and dryness. Apply lotion after washing to lock in moisture. Cooling lotions in the refrigerator prior to use can help increase relief from itch.