Managing Itch

Some common symptoms of psoriasis include itch, irritation and pain. People with psoriasis have also described the itch as a burning or stinging sensation.

What should I know about psoriasis itch?

The word “psoriasis” comes from the Greek word “psora” that means “to itch.” About 70 to 90 percent of people with psoriasis report experiencing itch as a symptom that impacts their overall quality of life. You can experience itch in areas that do not have psoriasis lesions.

Psoriasis itch often follows an itch-scratch cycle:

1. You generally experience an itch when something external touches your skin and triggers itch receptors. There is also research being done to study the connection between psoriatic inflammation and triggers for itch.

2. Your nerves have itch receptors that respond by sending a signal through the spinal cord to the brain that causes you to want to scratch.

3. Scratching provides temporary relief by interrupting the itch signal. However, scratching can worsen the itch by over-activating nerve fibers. This increases the itch and the urge to scratch.

4. Scratching can also trigger the Koebner phenomenon (when skin injuries trigger a psoriasis flare). This is because scratching can cause breaks in the skin, flaking and bleeding that can then worsen symptoms. The worsening of psoriasis symptoms can then trigger itching again.

How do prescription treatments reduce itch?

Effectively treating your psoriasis can reduce psoriasis lesions, stop the itch-scratch cycle and reduce symptoms, such as itch, irritation and pain. Biologics have been found to be more effective than topical treatments in many ways. This is because biologics are able to reduce the itch signals sent to the brain.

There are also other prescription treatments that specifically help with itch. These include topical or oral antihistamines, phototherapy, topical corticosteroids (also called steroids), topical anesthetics and others.

Scientists are researching new psoriasis treatments that reduce itch by targeting the nervous system. These include newer biologics and topicals.

Seal of Recognition products

NPF’s Seal of Recognition can be found on OTC products that are proven safe and effective for managing psoriasis symptoms. For a list of products that carry the Seal of Recognition visit psoriasis.org/seal/product-directory.
What can I do at home to reduce itch?

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

- **Keep skin moisturized.** Moisturizing is the first step in controlling itch because it helps the skin heal and reduces redness and itching. There are many types of moisturizers available at major drugstores and supermarkets. There are even over-the-counter (OTC) moisturizers that specifically treat itch that contain ingredients such as menthol, camphor, pramoxine or capsaicin. Moisturizers come in various forms, including lotions, creams, ointments, oils, foams or even sprays. You may want to consider whether you prefer a moisturizer that is lighter (like lotions or creams) or thicker (like ointments or oils). It may be preferable to use a lighter moisturizer during the day and a thicker one at night or overnight. It is important to find one that you like that’s affordable for you.

- **Reduce scaling and flaking.** Removing dead skin cells is important so that topical treatments and moisturizers can penetrate the top layers of skin. There are OTC products that help soften, loosen and remove dead skin cells. These products often contain ingredients such as salicylic acid, lactic acid, urea or phenol to help remove scale.

- **Consider cold showers and cooling products.** Take showers or baths that are warm to cool, not hot, because the hot water can increase skin irritation and dryness. It is also helpful to keep your showers or baths short because long showers or baths do not hydrate your skin and can strip your skin of its natural oils. However, you can add oatmeal, Dead Sea salts or Epsom salts to your bath to help relieve dry, itchy skin. Remember to moisturize right after you bathe or shower. You can also try using cold packs, or compresses or lotions stored in the refrigerator prior to use, because the cold can help relieve itch.

What should I know about stress and itch?

One of the keys to managing your psoriasis and itch is to understand what causes your psoriasis symptoms to flare. Psoriasis triggers vary for each person. Speak with your health care provider about ways to avoid or reduce your triggers.

Stress is known to be a common psoriasis trigger and can worsen symptoms of itch. Relaxation and stress-reduction techniques may help prevent stress from worsening your psoriasis symptoms.

- Take part in activities or hobbies that you enjoy.
- Take care of yourself by changing unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as tobacco or alcohol use, eating too much or too little, or poor sleep hygiene.
- Say “No” to new responsibilities that may cause stress.
- Try meditation, mindfulness or relaxation methods.
- Consider starting or adding stress-reduction exercises to your physical activity routine, such as yoga or tai chi.

What should I do next?

Contact our Patient Navigation Center to find providers, discuss treatments and get help with accessing treatments (find contact information below).

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