Managing scalp psoriasis

At least half of all the people who have psoriasis have it on their scalp. Scalp psoriasis can be very mild, with slight, fine scaling. It can also be very severe with thick, crusted plaques covering the entire scalp. Psoriasis can extend beyond the hairline onto the forehead, the back of the neck and around the ears. Scalp psoriasis often appears powdery with a silvery sheen.

Over-the-counter treatment

- Salicylic acid softens psoriasis scale and makes it easier to remove. Treatments with high concentrations of salicylic acid can cause irritation. Salicylic acid may also weaken hair shafts and make them more likely to break, causing temporary hair loss.

- Tar products are widely used to treat scalp psoriasis. You will be able to find over-the-counter tar shampoos, creams, gels, oils, ointments and soaps. Your doctor also can prescribe tar in a variety of strengths. While tar is an effective medication, it can stain bedding and gray hair, and has a strong odor.

- Many medicated shampoos for treating scalp lesions are on the market. Remember, medicated shampoos are designed for the scalp, not the hair. You may want to use a regular cosmetic conditioner after your scalp treatment to reduce the smell of the medicated shampoo and make your hair more manageable.

Prescription treatment

- If crusting of the scalp along with scaling occurs and/or the lymph nodes in your neck are enlarged, your doctor may prescribe antimicrobial treatment. Scalp psoriasis can get worse if the scalp becomes infected with bacteria or yeast.

- Vitamin D topical derivatives like calcipotriene (also known by its brand name Dovonex) are formulated to slow skin cell growth, flatten lesions and remove scale.

- Calcipotriene and betamethasone dipropionate (also known by its brand name Taclonex Scalp) is the combination of the vitamin D3 derivative calcipotriene and the potent steroid betamethasone dipropionate.

- Sometimes doctors prescribe intralesional steroid injections. This is done only when the scalp psoriasis involves limited areas.

- Tazarotene (also known by its brand name Tazorac) is a topical vitamin A derivative that comes in a cream or gel form for the treatment of psoriasis.

- Topical steroids come in solutions, gels, creams, lotions, sprays, ointments and foam. Topical steroids range from very mild to potent. Strong steroids should not be used continuously for long periods.

- Phototherapy can be used to treat scalp psoriasis. Hand-held devices called UV combs are available to deliver a higher intensity of UV light. Natural sunlight may also help if the hair is very thin or the head is shaved.

- Lasers deliver ultraviolet B (UVB) light that can help clear skin with psoriasis. Unlike traditional phototherapy, dermatologists can precisely target treatment to psoriasis lesions, which can withstand higher doses of UVB light than healthy skin. The laser's ability to deliver higher doses of light therapy allows people to clear more quickly and

Tips for dealing with scalp itch

- Use a conditioner after every shampoo to keep the scalp moisturized. Dry scalp can cause itching or make it worse.

- Limit the use of hot tools to style hair, or let hair air-dry to reduce scalp dryness.

- Shampoos, lotions and creams which include menthol as an active ingredient can be helpful in soothing itch.

- Press a wet towel or cold pack against the itchy spot.
with fewer treatments than with conventional phototherapy. The main issues reported by patients are redness and mild burning similar to sunburn.

- If moderate to severe psoriasis is present on other skin sites in addition to the scalp, your doctor may prescribe systemic psoriasis treatments (treatments that are taken by mouth or by injection). The most common include methotrexate, oral retinoids, cyclosporine, apremilast, and biologic drugs.

**Scale softening and removal**

Scale lifting is necessary to make it easier for topical medications to penetrate the plaques and clear them. Scale softeners contain active ingredients such as salicylic acid, urea, lactic acid or phenol. Soaking the scalp in warm (not hot) water can help loosen scales. Another way to soften and loosen scales is to apply oils, lotions, creams or ointments to a damp scalp.

Once the psoriasis scale has been softened, it needs to be removed. One of the best methods is to comb the scalp gently in a light circular motion, holding the comb almost flat against the scalp. Removing scales too vigorously can break the skin and lead to an infection. It can also break hair off at the scalp, causing temporary hair loss. The Koebner [keb-ner] response, a tendency for psoriasis to appear on damaged skin, can occur at the site of rough scratching or scraping.

**Effective application of medications**

- Part your hair and hold it in place while you drip or pat oils or lotions directly onto your scalp. Make a new part about a half-inch away and repeat. If you use a cream or ointment, rub it right into the psoriasis. All preparations should be used sparingly.

- Treat all of the affected areas, including those around the ears and hairline. Products such as anthralin and tazarotene may irritate the folds behind the ears. Protect those areas by covering them with a thin layer of petroleum jelly before applying medications. Avoid getting any medication in the eyes.

- Pre-treat the scalp lesions with scale-softening agents or oils to soften and remove the heavy scales and make scalp medications more effective.

- Shampoo your hair before applying a scalp medication.

- Apply petroleum jelly to cotton balls and insert them gently into the ears before applying the medications or shampoos to keep medications out of the ears.

**Occlusion and stain protection**

Shower caps, towels, plastic wrap and plastic produce bags are examples of items used to occlude (cover) the scalp. Occlusion can enhance a treatment while also protecting pillows, clothes and furniture from medications and oils. Never use a shower cap or other covering with prescription scalp medications, unless specifically directed by your doctor.