Scalp psoriasis

Over 60 percent of people with psoriasis have scalp psoriasis. Scalp psoriasis can affect the hairline or extend beyond the hairline onto the forehead, the back of the neck and around the ears. Plaques can appear powdery with a silvery sheen or more like a purple color. Symptoms can be fine scaling or appear as thick, crusted plaques that may cover the entire scalp. In very rare cases, scalp psoriasis may affect hair growth.

There are over-the-counter (OTC) products to help manage symptoms as well as safe and effective treatment options for scalp psoriasis. Your health care provider will recommend treatments based on your severity and your experience with previous treatments. It is important to remember that response times to treatments vary among individuals. If your treatment plan is not working or meeting your treatment goals, speak with your health care provider about other treatment options that may be appropriate for you.

What are some OTC products?

OTC products include shampoos, conditioners, soaps and other topicals that contain active ingredients to help reduce symptoms. The 2 active ingredients that you should look for in OTC products are salicylic acid and tar.

- Salicylic acid works as a scale lifter and can help to soften and remove scales or plaques. This ingredient can be found in products such as creams, gels, lotions, ointments, shampoos and soaps.
- Tar made from wood or coal works to slow skin cell growth and reduce inflammation, itching and scaling. This ingredient can be found in shampoos or as preparations that can be applied to plaques or added to baths.

If using medicated shampoos, we recommend using the medicated shampoo just on your scalp and regular shampoo and/or conditioner on the length of your hair.

Tips for dealing with itch

- Try not to scratch or pick at a psoriasis lesion to help prevent worsening of symptoms.
- Use a conditioner after every shampoo to keep the scalp moisturized. Dry scalp can cause itching or make it worse.
- Limit the use of heated tools to style hair or air-dry your hair to reduce dry scalp.
- Shampoos, lotions and creams that include menthol as an active ingredient can be helpful in soothing itch.
- Press a wet towel or cold pack against the itchy spot.
First-line treatment options

These are generally the first treatments recommended according to treatment standards.

Your health care provider may recommend using one or a combination of the following:

- Medicated shampoos including tar, salicylic acid, selenium, topical corticosteroid (also called steroids), zinc or ketoconazole
- Topical steroids
- Topical tars
- Prescription topicals, including Dovonex (calcipotriene), Tazorac (tazarotene), Dithranol or Zithranol-RR (anthralin)

Second-line treatment options

If your scalp psoriasis is not controlled by a first-line treatment, then it may be necessary to try one of the following:

- Biologics and oral treatments
- Targeted ultraviolet B light (UVB) phototherapy (also called light therapy)

What should I do next?

Contact our Patient Navigation Center to find providers, prepare for appointments, discuss treatments and get help with accessing treatments [find contact information below].

Tips on applying topicals

Safely softening and removing plaques can make it easier for topical treatments to penetrate the top layers of skin. Soaking the scalp in warm (not hot) water or applying oils, lotions, creams or ointments to a damp scalp can help soften plaques. You can then comb the scalp gently in light circular motions by holding the comb almost flat against the scalp to remove softened plaques.

Apply topicals carefully, following prescribed instructions from your health care provider.

- If you are using OTC products, speak with your health care provider about the most appropriate way to use it for your scalp psoriasis.
- It is generally recommended to shampoo your hair before applying topicals to your scalp. However, your health care provider may recommend different instructions depending on your hair texture and how often you shampoo your hair.
- Be sure to avoid sensitive areas, such as around the eyes and ears, if they are not affected. You can apply a thin layer of petroleum jelly to sensitive areas before using topicals on plaques that are nearby.

Your health care provider may recommend occlusion (covering) to increase the effects of topical products and treatments. This can be done by using a shower cap, towel, plastic wrap or plastic bag. This method of applying a topical and covering it should only be used when directed by your health care provider.