

# Good News for Scalp Psoriasis headlines:

## An introduction to scalp psoriasis



### Who gets it?

Scalp psoriasis affects around two percent of the people in the UK and it can start at any age, but it is more likely to develop between the ages of 11 and 45. People often first start noticing the symptoms when they go through puberty.

### What causes it?

The causes of psoriasis are not well understood, and even the experts don't fully understand what triggers psoriasis. The immune system - the body's natural defense against disease - seems to be involved. For some reason, in people with scalp psoriasis, the immune system attacks perfectly healthy skin cells and then in turn triggers the body to produce new cells much more quickly than normal. These dead skin cells then lie on the surface of the scalp in thick scaly patches.

If the immune system is affected by certain diseases (e.g. streptococcal throat infections, viral respiratory infections, boils), then scalp psoriasis can worsen or appear for the first time.

Scalp psoriasis can run in families - but exactly how this happens still isn't fully understood. Certain genes have been identified as being linked to psoriasis. It appears, however, that a genetic tendency needs to be triggered by such things as:

- Physical and emotional stress
- Injury
- Alcohol abuse
- Throat infection
- Certain prescription medicines (including anti-inflammatory pills and some heart medication)
- Smoking

Psoriasis is a chronic condition characterised by periods of relapse and remission. In other words, it can go on for a long time and often returns. The symptoms can flare-up and get worse, and then the condition can calm down again.

Although there is no "cure" many sufferers can achieve remission with appropriate advice, support and medication.

### What are the symptoms?

Scalp psoriasis normally appears on the back of the head. However, it can occur on other areas of your scalp, across the whole scalp

or behind the ears. It is characterised as raised red patches of skin covered with silvery scales. Some find that it is extremely itchy, sore and feels 'tight'. It can sometimes cause hair loss, although this is not permanent.

It is most definitely NOT contagious, so you don't have to worry about passing it on to anyone.

### How is it diagnosed?

Normally, your doctor will examine you and make the diagnosis from the appearance of the affected areas of skin. Occasionally, a small sample of skin scrapings will be sent to a laboratory so they can look at the skin cells under a microscope. This will help to clarify the situation in case your doctor thinks you might be suffering from another condition that looks like scalp psoriasis.

### Are there any complications arising from this condition?

Around 10-20% of people with psoriasis also develop a condition called 'psoriatic arthritis'. The symptoms of this are pain and stiffness in the joints, often affecting the ends of the fingers and the toes although it can affect the lower back, neck and knees. Most people who get psoriatic arthritis get it after the symptoms of the psoriasis develop, but a few get the arthritis symptoms first.

Something else you might experience are feelings of low mood or depression. Discuss these with your doctor. You might also find it useful to join a support group and get in contact with others who are experiencing similar symptoms and feelings. See the section at the end of this booklet which gives further sources of information.

### How is scalp psoriasis treated?

The good news is that although there is no cure for psoriasis, there are effective treatments. The first thing you should do is to consult your GP. Then ensure you find a treatment that is right for you. If you've been prescribed a treatment which you are finding difficult to use then don't be afraid to go back and discuss this with your doctor. New medicines are becoming available for scalp psoriasis all the time, so your GP or dermatologist may be able to offer an alternative treatment.

Occasional 'flare-ups' can be managed at home with products available from your local pharmacy including emollient creams, and coal tar shampoos.

A GP or dermatologist can prescribe more potent treatments to help bring the 'flare-up' under control. All the topical treatments mentioned below have been designed specifically to treat scalp psoriasis. Remember; your doctor is the best person to talk to about the most effective treatment for you as an individual.

### **Cetrimide**

Cetrimide is an antiseptic which can kill some of the bacteria, fungi and viruses that might infect the skin. It is a detergent so also helps to remove the dead cells on the surface of the skin as well as cleaning it.

### **Coal tar treatments**

Coal tar comes in the form of a sticky oil and is probably one of the oldest treatments for psoriasis. It isn't fully understood how it works, but it reduces scaly skin, inflammation and itchiness.

### **Coconut oil**

This ingredient softens the skin. Applied to the skin, ideally under a shower cap or cling film, it is often used as a first stage in treatment.

### **Corticosteroids**

If you have mild or moderate psoriasis, these are the treatments that are most likely to be prescribed by your doctor. They work by slowing down how fast skin cells are produced which reduces the inflammation and relieves the symptoms of itching. These treatments should only be used under the direction of a doctor. Corticosteroids include: betamethasone, clobetasol, fluocinolone, hydrocortisone, and mometasone.

### **Dithranol treatments**

Dithranol is a treatment that has been used for over half a century. It suppresses skin-cell production but is usually only used in the short term. This treatment is usually only put on for a few minutes before being washed off in order to prevent staining.

### **Lecithin**

Lecithin softens psoriasis scales and helps coal tar to be absorbed in to the skin.

### **Phenylethyl alcohol**

This compound is an antiseptic that kills certain bacteria.

### **Salicylic acid**

Salicylic acid works by loosening the scales and relieving the itching as well as helping to reduce skin-thickening and scaling.

### **Sulphur**

Sulphur helps to loosen the scales as well as having a mild antiseptic and antifungal action.

### **Undecenoic acid**

Undecenoic acid kills some of the fungi that infect the skin.

### **Vitamin D**

Vitamin D derivatives work by slowing down the production of skin cells. The treatments containing vitamin D do not smell as strongly as coal tar or dithranol creams and ointments, but they can cause irritation in some people.

## **The Challenge**

Psoriasis, and in particular scalp psoriasis, has been considered difficult to manage. Most treatments are topical and time consuming to fit into daily life. Some of the challenges include:

- Application can be complicated and messy
- Treatment time - traditional products need to be left on the hair for up to 24 hours
- Hair can be left with a sticky or greasy appearance
- Interference of the treatment with everyday hairstyling
- Strong, unpleasant odours

However, please do discuss your treatment options with your healthcare professional as there is now a much wider choice of treatment formulations available, such as "leave in" scalp treatments, "short contact" scalp treatments, creams, gels, foams, solutions and "rinse out" shampoos.

## **What questions should I ask my doctor?**

- How is the treatment taken or used?
- How long should I use the treatment for?
- What alternative treatments are there?
- Are there any new treatments that I haven't tried?
- What are the side effects of this treatment?
- When should I see an improvement in my symptoms?
- Is there a local psoriasis support group in my area?

## **Looking ahead to the future**

The best way to avoid flare-ups of scalp psoriasis is to follow your doctor's advice as well as making a few simple lifestyle changes e.g. healthy diet and reducing alcohol intake. It is important to find the right treatment for you as an individual, so if you don't think that a particular product is working as well as it should, or it is causing side effects, or you find the way you have to use is inconvenient, don't be afraid to ask your GP or dermatologist for a suitable alternative.

Although there isn't a cure for scalp psoriasis as yet, you should find that you can control your symptoms and live life to the full.

### **Further sources of information**

The Psoriasis Association  
[www.psoriasis-association.org.uk](http://www.psoriasis-association.org.uk) | Tel: 0845 6760076

British Skin Foundation  
[www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk](http://www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk)

Skin Care Campaign  
[www.skincarecampaign.org](http://www.skincarecampaign.org) | Tel: 07810 564913

The Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance (PAPAA)  
[www.papaa.org](http://www.papaa.org) | Tel: 01923 672837