

LICHEN SIMPLEX CHRONICUS

Overview

Lichen simplex chronicus (LSC) is a condition causing thickened skin at the areas of skin injured by repeated scratching or rubbing. Thick, scaly, slightly elevated lesions with pronounced skin lines occur when the skin is repeatedly rubbed. The lesions appear darker in color, however, there is no increased pigment. The thickening makes the skin look darker. Lichen simplex chronicus is not a primary disease but rather the result of chronic physical injury (trauma). Lichen simplex chronicus begins as itchy skin. The gradual thickening of skin, caused by the scratching and rubbing, is called lichenification.

Who's at Risk

Lichen simplex chronicus can occur in people of any age, of any race, and of either sex.

Conditions that can lead to lichen simplex chronicus include:

Insect bites

Scars

Eczema (atopic dermatitis)

Dry skin (xerosis)

Poor circulation in legs (venous insufficiency)

Anxiety and stress

Signs and Symptoms

Although it can occur anywhere on the body, lichen simplex chronicus is most commonly seen in the following areas:

Inner wrists, forearms, and elbows

Sides and back of neck

Upper thighs, knees, shins, ankles, and tops of feet

Vulva, scrotum, anus (anogenital areas)

Scalp

Each patch of lichen simplex chronicus appears as leathery, thickened skin in which the normal skin lines are exaggerated. The thickened skin is darker than surrounding skin. This darkening is even more apparent in dark-skinned people.

Individuals with lichen simplex chronicus report periodic itching that is most intense at night or any time they are still.

Self-Care Guidelines

The primary treatment is to stop scratching. However, this can be very difficult once a scratch-itch cycle has started. Areas of lichen simplex chronicus may need to be covered at night, as many people scratch in their sleep.

Use moisturizers to help relieve itchy skin. When choosing a moisturizer, look for oil-based creams and ointments which work better than water-based lotions. Apply moisturizers just after bathing, while the skin is still moist.

Cortisone cream or ointment can be used to decrease the itch.

If there are breaks or cracks in the skin, apply plain Vaseline to these areas.

When to Seek Medical Care

See your doctor if the itching does not improve with self-care measures, if you are developing more lesions, or if you develop symptoms of infection such as pain, redness, drainage of pus, or fever. For very troublesome areas, intralesional kenalog (injecting cortisone into the area) can often help immensely.