
ITCH (PRURITUS)

WHAT IS ITCH (PRURITUS)

Everyone knows what itch is, but it is difficult to define. Itch (pruritus) is a sensation, a stimulus that causes you to scratch the itchy area. Originally, it was an ancient defence mechanism in humans and animals: if something causes an itchy or tickling sensation on the skin, it could be a mosquito, a flea, a parasite, or something that could cause an allergic reaction or irritation, and it must be removed. The itch stimulus triggers a reflex, the itch reflex, and we automatically start scratching, even in our sleep. Of course, it becomes a problem when there is a constant itching sensation when there is nothing wrong and no reason to scratch anywhere.

Itch can be very annoying, a nightmare. It can dominate and disrupt your whole life. Children with itch cannot sleep. Adults go 'crazy with itching'. Itching is worse than pain is a well-known saying.

Itching can occur with certain skin conditions, such as dry skin, eczema, or psoriasis. In these cases, there are also visible abnormalities. But it can also occur without any visible changes to the skin. The medical term for itching is **pruritus**. If skin disorders are present, such as itchy bumps, the term **prurigo** is used.



WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF ITCHING?

Dry skin

Dry skin can cause itching. This is particularly common in older people, but also in people with atopic eczema.

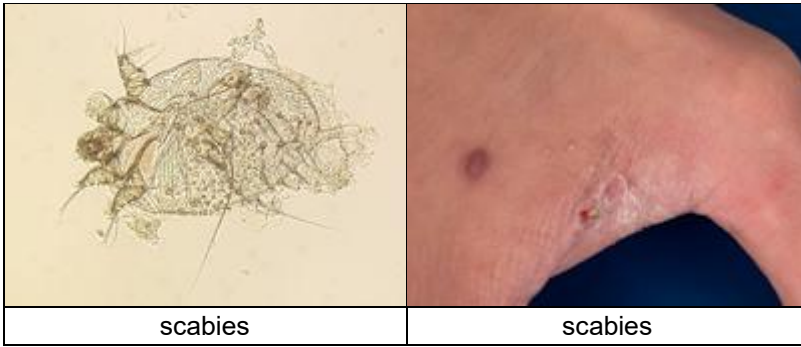


An itchy skin condition

There are many skin diseases that cause itching. The best-known examples are eczema, psoriasis, and hives (urticaria). Fungal infections with *Candida* can also cause itching.

A parasitic infection

There are skin parasites that can cause severe itching, such as scabies mites. However, parasitic infections contracted in the tropics, such as intestinal worm infections, can also cause itching. The parasites cause an allergic reaction, which causes the itching.



Insect bites

All kinds of stinging insects can cause itching. Not only mosquitoes, but also midges, horseflies, fleas, mites, and bugs can sting and cause itchy bumps. Sometimes the reaction persists for a long time (persistent insect bite).

Medications

Many medicines can cause itching. Check the package insert to see if this is mentioned as a side effect. But even if it is not mentioned, the medicine may still be the cause. Sometimes you can find information on the internet by searching for the name of the substance in the medicine in combination with keywords such as itch, pruritus, prurigo, allergy, allergic reaction, rash, etc. The only way to find out whether the medicine is playing a role is to stop taking it (for at least 2 months) or replace it with a medicine from a completely different group.

Internal diseases

Itching can occur with an internal disease. There are many internal conditions that can cause itching. However, it is rare for an internal disease to be found as the cause of itching in someone. It is wise to investigate chronic unexplained itching further, usually just with a blood test, to see if there could be an internal disease as the underlying cause. The list of internal diseases includes:

- Haematological disorders (blood diseases), both benign (polycythaemia) and malignant (lymphomas, leukaemia).
- Uraemia (kidney failure. When the kidneys are no longer functioning properly, waste products accumulate and cause itching).
- Icterus (jaundice), caused by a liver that is not functioning properly. In this case, waste products also accumulate, causing itching.
- Diabetes. Later studies showed that diabetes does not cause itching very often, although it can sometimes cause it indirectly due to the medication that diabetes patients take, or fungal infections of the skin, which they are slightly more prone to.
- Psychological factors.
- Anaemia, including iron deficiency.
- Senility (old age). Older people often have dry skin, and dry skin can cause itching.
- Toxicoderma (a skin reaction caused by medication).
- Ancylostoma (a worm infection), and other parasitic infections, tropical infections, and diseases such as scabies, lice, fleas, etc.
- Thyroid diseases.

Cause unknown

Unfortunately, no cause is often found for chronic itching. This is very frustrating, not only for you but also for your doctor. At some point, when all possible causes have been thoroughly investigated and ruled out, you will have to accept that it is a chronic and unsolvable problem and look for treatments that alleviate the itching (symptom relief).

Psychological factors

Itching can certainly be psychological. Some people start itching just by reading about it (this brochure, for example, or a brochure about scabies). Healthcare providers who have admitted a patient with scabies without knowing it all start itching acutely when they hear the diagnosis.

Itching, whatever the cause, often starts at the end of the day, when we are sitting quietly on the couch. Or at night in bed. Distraction helps. Doing something else reduces the itching. The other stimuli make that we pay less attention to the itching stimuli. Itching can also occur in patients with psychological problems. It often happens after a serious event (death, divorce, dismissal, etc.), sometimes due to stress, depression, or a psychiatric disorder. Itching can also be a side effect of medications prescribed for psychological complaints.

Neurological causes

Apart from the psychological effects mentioned above, itching can also have a neurological cause: a disturbance in nerve conduction or in the brain causes an itching sensation to be perceived without anything actually being wrong. The itching seems to be felt in the skin, but there is something wrong with the nerve. An example is a condition called *notalgia paresthetica*. This causes an itchy spot on the back, often just below the shoulder blade, and is caused by irritation of a nerve. A similar condition is called *brachioradial pruritus*, in which nerves are pinched near the *brachioradialis* muscle.

Chronic scratching

If you have a habit of scratching the same spot all the time, or do so as a result of stress, an itchy spot with thickened skin (as a result of scratching) will develop. This spot will continue to itch and scratching will only make it worse. This is called *lichen simplex chronicus*. These types of itchy spots are often found on the wrists, ankles, or neck (typical areas that are easy to reach), but they can also be found on the genitals and around the anus. Itching around the anus (*pruritus ani*) can also have other causes.

Pregnancy

Itching is common during pregnancy (affecting around 50% of pregnant women). Skin abnormalities may also develop (itchy bumps, hives, rashes, blisters). These are called pregnancy dermatoses (itchy skin abnormalities that develop during pregnancy).

HOW IS ITCHING TREATED?

Ideally, a clear cause for the itching can be found, which can then be eliminated with a simple treatment, after which the itching will disappear. Sometimes this is possible, for example if the itching was caused by a medication that can be stopped, or by scabies, which can then be treated. Unfortunately, it is very common that no cause can be found. The only thing left then are treatments and measures that alleviate the itching.

General advice:

- Try not to scratch, as scratching provides temporary relief but ultimately only makes it worse.
- Apply something to the area instead of scratching.
- If you really can't help yourself, scratch through a layer of clothing. Try replacing scratching with gently tapping the skin, pressing with your fingertips, or lightly squeezing.
- Keep your nails short and clean to limit damage if the urge to scratch becomes too strong.
- If the itching is severe, find a distraction and try to focus on something else.
- Prevent scratching at night: use cotton gloves or something else to cover the nails. For babies, there are also special baby mittens and cotton and silk pyjamas (anti-scratch suits).
- Keep the skin moisturized, prevent dryness, and treat eczema or psoriasis properly.
- Avoid things that can dry out the skin: alcohol on the skin, showering too often or too hot, using too much soap, heat, sauna.
- Avoid things that can irritate the skin, aggressive products, perfumed detergents and toiletries, itchy sweaters, sunburn.
- Avoid strongly spiced meals, large quantities of hot drinks, and alcoholic beverages.
- Avoid stress.

Treatment with topical products to be applied to the skin.

- Creams, ointments, moisturizing lotions. The pharmacy has products such as cetomacrogol cream, lanette cream, the oilier vaseline-cetomacrogol cream, or vaseline-lanette cream. But these do not always have to be prescription products. There are various reputable brands that make excellent skin care products that you can buy at the supermarket or drugstore.
- Menthol creams and lotions.
- Creams containing capsaicin. Capsaicin is the burning substance in chili peppers. It creates a sensation that suppresses the itching.
- Lidocaine-containing products. Lidocaine has a numbing effect, but can cause side effects if used excessively.
- Zinc oxide. Zinc oxide relieves itching, protects the skin, and has a cooling effect. It is available without a prescription. It is white, which can be a disadvantage from a cosmetic point of view. Zinc oxide is available in the form of lotion, ointment, paste, salve, and cream. Zinc oxide lotion is suitable for large areas (e.g., chickenpox). The water in the lotion evaporates, giving the lotion a cooling sensation and relieving itching. The solid substance (powder) from the lotion remains as a layer on the skin, so do not use the lotion on wounds. Zinc oxide lime water ointment (ZOK ointment) and zinc oxide ointment are used for weeping skin conditions, and zinc oxide paste and ointment for dry skin conditions. Zinc oxide cream is used for eczema in skin folds and diaper rash.
- Corticosteroid creams or ointments.

Light therapy

Light therapy with UV-B or broad-spectrum light (see leaflet on light therapy) is also an effective treatment for certain forms of chronic itching.

Treatment with tablets, medicines that you take orally

- Antihistamines. These are anti-itch tablets that are also prescribed for hives and hay fever. These medications cause few side effects and sometimes help, but unfortunately not always for itching.
- Gabapentin.
- Activated charcoal.
- Prednisone.
- Cyclosporine.
- Antidepressants. These drugs interfere with the transmission of itch signals via the nerves.

Others

In the case of insect bites or contact with stinging nettles, dabbing with natural vinegar can provide relief. Some patients find a back scratcher useful, but be careful not to damage the skin (and scratching only helps temporarily; it usually makes things worse). A cold compress on the itchy area, such as a slightly damp washcloth or towel that you first place in the refrigerator for a while, or a cold pack wrapped in a cloth or washcloth, can provide relief.

