

# Psoriasis

## »» How to Cope With This Lifelong Skin Condition

**P**soriasis is a disease that causes red, itchy, scaly and inflamed skin that cracks and bleeds.

It affects about 7.5 million U.S. residents and has no real cure, according to the National Psoriasis Foundation.

No cause for psoriasis has been identified, but it has been linked to heredity. Many patients have at least one family member with the condition. Psoriasis also can be caused by your body's reaction to infections, particularly strep throat.

### Types of Disease

Five types of psoriasis have been identified:

**Plaque psoriasis** — This is the most common type. It causes large red, scaly areas, generally on the scalp, face, elbows, knees, hands, feet and genitals.

**Guttate psoriasis** — Affected patients have small red, scaly spots that may connect over time.

**Inverse psoriasis** — Red, smooth areas occur in the skin folds, armpits and groin; more common in overweight patients.

**Pustular psoriasis** — In addition to red areas, the skin also has white blisters.

**Erythrodermic psoriasis** —The lesions associated with this form appear as red areas over large portions of the body.

Between 5% and 10% of patients with psoriasis develop psoriatic arthritis, which causes swollen, painful joints, especially in the hands and feet.

People with severe psoriasis also may be at higher risk for cancer, heart attack or depression. Talk to your health care provider about tests that can check for these conditions.

It can be difficult to see other people react when they see psoriasis on your skin. You may feel hurt or depressed. Let your health care provider know if you are feeling this way, to see what can be done to make you feel better.

### Treatment Options

For many people, dealing with psoriasis is a lifelong struggle, and it can be difficult to manage the disease. Patients try many kinds of treatments, or combinations of treatments, until they find ones that work. Over time,

treatments may be changed to reduce side effects or to make sure you don't use too much of one type of medication.

Treatment choices often depend on how bad your case is (symptoms can range from thick, scaly skin to inflamed, bleeding skin) and how much of your body is covered with psoriasis.

Your health care provider will recommend the weakest drug with the fewest side effects first. Then he or she will usually move to a stronger medication, which has more severe side effects, if necessary.

Generally, treatments begin with mild therapies such as the following:

- topical corticosteroids (creams rubbed on the skin)
- creams containing vitamin A or vitamin D
- ointment containing coal tar
- light therapy using UVA or UVB lights provided in a clinical office setting (a tanning salon is not an appropriate source of therapeutic light).

If these don't work well, you may need other medications that suppress your body's ability to fight infections because your immune system is working against you. These medications carry some risk of organ damage and birth defects for pregnant women and cannot be taken for long periods.

### Further Efforts

Although there is no cure for psoriasis, your health care provider may be able to help you ease your symptoms with medications or phototherapy.

You may even be asked to use a method called "occlusion," which involves covering the medicated cream you put on your psoriasis with plastic or tape to keep it from rubbing off. This will keep the affected area in contact with medication at all times.

Taking care of your skin — keeping it moisturized and clean — may help keep symptoms from getting worse.

Cuts, scrapes and burns often turn into psoriasis in someone who is already affected by it.

You also may be encouraged to try to find the "trigger" that sets off a flare-up. Common triggers are stress and certain foods.

Cold weather, smoking and alcohol abuse are thought to worsen psoriasis symptoms, and certain medications also can cause an increase in symptoms. NP

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