

Lichen planus

Women's Health

Lichen planus is a skin condition familiar to dermatologists. The usual form of this skin disorder is itchy bumps especially on the shins, the inner wrists and hands. A rare type of lichen planus affects mucous membranes of the mouth and genitals. Both kinds of lichen planus can affect men and women and patients often have both mouth and skin lesions. Vaginal lichen planus is not caused by vaginal infections, hormones or aging. Skin with lichen planus is moist and red (eroded) because the top layer rubs off very easily.

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

Lichen planus can resemble other vulval skin disorders, but lichen planus is the major one that involves the vagina as well as the vulva. Some blistering skin diseases also produce vulval erosions. A biopsy is usually necessary to diagnose lichen planus. This is a minor procedure done with a local anaesthetic in the clinic.

How do I get lichen planus?

No one knows how lichen planus starts, but we do not think that it is because of anything you did or didn't do. Most patients just develop lichen planus for no apparent reason. It is not an infection that you catch from anyone and you certainly cannot give it to anyone else. Lichen planus lesions result from inflammation in the skin, but we do not know what makes lesions develop in one place or another. The thin mucous membranes inside the mouth and vagina lose their top layer when they become inflamed, so red erosions rather than bumps develop when lichen planus affects these areas.

What kind of problems can I have with lichen planus?

Lichen planus on the skin is often extremely itchy and it may be difficult to control, even with high potency medications. Erosive lichen planus can be painful in the mouth and vagina and these areas can become infected. Vaginal erosions on opposing surfaces may heal together forming thin scar tissue that narrows the vagina. Surgical separation of these surfaces is relatively easy, however using vaginal dilators and cortisone creams can help prevent scar tissue formation.

Can lichen planus be treated and is it curable?

Lichen planus usually improves with certain kinds of creams and ointments. Although the skin may not look entirely normal when it heals, medications can control the itching and erosion. In some cases lichen planus just seems to come and go on its own. The purposes of therapy are to decrease inflammation and steroids seem to do this the best. When a disease is limited to the skin, creams and ointments are best because of complications with steroids given by mouth.

There is not presently any one ideal treatment for erosive lichen planus, but several new drugs have been promising. Dermatologists generally know the most about new treatments for lichen planus.

If lichen planus is not an infection, why do antibiotics help?

The top layer of skin is a barrier against all kinds of bacteria. When this layer is lost, then the moist lower layers of skin can become infected. This secondary infection can keep the skin from healing as rapidly as it could – antibiotic vaginal creams and oral medications control germs that keep the skin from healing.

What role does yeast (candida) play in lichen planus?

Candida organisms grow very well in a moist environment where there is no skin barrier. They also thrive when steroids or antibiotics are used and candida infection (thrush) can keep the skin from healing properly. Your doctor may ask you to use a vaginal or oral anti-candidal medication once or twice a week when you are being treated for a flare up of symptoms.

Is there a chance that lichen planus could turn into cancer?

There is a very slight risk of developing a local type of skin cancer. The signs of a developing skin cancer are similar to those on other parts of the body such as a sore or ulcer that does not heal in a few weeks, a lesion that continues to bleed easily, or a bump or raised lesion that is getting progressively larger. If these do not heal despite regular use of your prescribed medication, then let your doctor have a look. It may be that your cream or ointment needs to be changed, but a biopsy might be necessary to be certain that all is well.

What should I watch for?

Because lichen planus is likely to flare and remit, you should pay close attention to vaginal discharge, which may indicate that erosion and /or secondary infection has developed. If you have had problems with vaginal narrowing, regular use of dilators may prevent this. Medication should be used on a regular maintenance basis, rather than only for severe flare ups, which are much harder to bring under control. You should have regular (at least yearly) visits to a dermatologist or gynaecologist who know about lichen planus. This is not necessarily a 'pre-malignant' condition, but your doctor should do a biopsy any time he or she thinks a change might be abnormal.

Do not hesitate to contact your GP for a further referral if you have concerns in the future.

Useful information: www.vulvalpainsociety.com

Contact us

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