

Lichen sclerosis

Women's Health Services

What is Lichen sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis is a relatively uncommon, inflammatory disease of the skin which causes whitening and gradual thinning of the skin. Lichen sclerosis can affect women of any age and on occasion can even develop in girls prior to puberty. There is a similar process which affects men. All areas of the body may be affected but it is more common on genital skin, thus in women it frequently involves the vulva and around the anus and in men the penis.

The cause of lichen sclerosis is unknown. On some occasions it is associated with the kind of disease which involves the production of antibodies against the body's own tissue, eg thyroid disease or diabetes. However, there is no evidence that this process is involved in lichen sclerosis itself. It is quite certain that the disease is not contagious, so the sexual partner cannot contract it through sexual intercourse. Pregnancy and delivery are not made more difficult.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is itching. In long standing disease, shrinkage of the affected skin can occur, producing narrowing of the vaginal opening. As the skin is thin it may crack and feel sore. Some people have no symptoms at all.

What can be done to treat lichen sclerosis?

There is a variety of treatments available for lichen sclerosis although no treatment can completely reverse the changes in the skin. The symptoms are usually relieved by the use of topical anti-inflammatory agents (corticosteroids) which are used once a day initially, usually at night. A 30g tube will last two to three months and is quite safe. Bland emollients, to soften and protect the skin, can be invaluable. If sexual intercourse is painful because of tightening to the entrance to the vagina, the use of lubricants and on occasion vaginal dilators will help.

The fragile skin may be a little more susceptible to infection with candida (thrush) or bacteria, and it may split a little or even bleed. All these problems can be treated. Cancer of the vulva is very rare but it may be a little more likely in lichen sclerosis than in normal skin, so all lumps and non-healing sores should always be examined by a doctor. There is, however, no need to have any surgery of the vulva itself unless there is definite proof of cancer.

Treatment instructions

It is important to stop using all soaps and bubble bath and to use a soap substitute, eg aqueous cream. This is cleansing and soothing. The skin will become softer and well moisturised. Wash once or twice a day at a maximum and avoid all wet wipes/baby wipes. The cream can be bought at a chemist (300g or 500g tubes).

You will have been prescribed Dermovate or Trimovate.

First month

Once a night apply a thin layer of **Dermovate** to the affected area, not forgetting the skin around the anus if this is involved too.

Second month

Apply **Trimovate** twice a week. A 30g tube will last two to three months and is quite safe.

Longer term maintenance

After this time you should only need to use the cream once a week or once a fortnight. If your symptoms return severely, return to a two week course of **Dermovate** to control them.

Side effects

There may be a burning sensation when you first apply the treatment, but this usually disappears within 10 minutes. If the burning persists and is severe, stop using the ointment as you may be sensitive to one of its ingredients. You should then change to the other ointment listed above. If you have further concerns thereafter, we would recommend you consult your GP.

Contact us

Leatherhead Hospital

Tel. 01372 384340

St Helier Hospital

Tel. 020 8296 2954 and select the option Colposcopy

Clinic opening hours: 8am-5pm, Monday-Friday

Useful websites

www.vulvalpainsociety.com

www.lichensclerosus.org

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