

# Medicine for Managers

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## Pruritus

**P** ruritus is the medical term for itchy skin. It tends to be a feature of getting older, because skin tends to become drier with age and the dryness is the cause of the irritation. Whatever the cause, the sensation of irritation or pruritus makes one want to scratch. It is a normal response because it protects the individual from harmful substances, but it is also a feature of some skin diseases, some illnesses and some psychological disorders.

### Symptoms of Pruritus

Pruritus may be localised or generalised and is probably the commonest symptom of a skin disorder. Itchy skin may look completely normal or noticeable changes may occur. These may include:

- Inflammation of the skin
- Scratch marks
- Spots or blistering
- General roughening or bumps
- Dryness and cracking of the skin
- Scaly patches or a thickened leathery appearance.



Pruritus may be transient or persistent and may become intense. Indeed scratching an affected

area may make the itching more irritating and severe, creating a vicious itch-scratch-itch cycle.

Scratching may damage the skin allowing the entry of infection through the breaches.

Interestingly, anything up to 10% of people may experience itching at any one time. Mostly it settles down over a short period but it is important to seek medical advice if:

- It persists for more than a fortnight
- It is severe and prevents sleep
- It is generalised
- It is associated with other symptoms such as generalised illness, weight loss or infection

### Causes of Pruritus

- **Skin diseases** such as eczema, psoriasis and scabies.
- **Other skin disorders** such as burns, scars and insect bites

- **Medical causes such as:**
  - **Illnesses** including liver disease, diabetes and thyroid disease
  - **Medication** such as opioids for pain relief
  - **Nerve Disorders** including multiple sclerosis or shingles
  - **Allergic reactions** such as wool and soap, or cosmetics
  - **Psychiatric causes** such as anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- **Getting older** as skin becomes drier
- **Iatrogenic** i.e. of unknown cause

### Sequelae of Pruritus

Persistent itching, called **chronic pruritus**, perhaps lasting 6-8 weeks or more, may disturb sleep, precipitate depression or anxiety, cause skin damage and superficial infection through scratching and lead to scarring.

### Diagnosis of Pruritus

In some cases the cause of itching is clear as a result of a detailed medical history and a thorough examination.

The GP may seek blood tests, including full blood count, liver and kidney testing, and blood sugar and thyroid levels. A chest X-ray may also be necessary.

Most causes of pruritus can be diagnosed by examination and the investigations.

### Treatment of Pruritus

A variety of ointments and creams are available from pharmacies, but if they fail to resolve the symptom, the individual should consult the GP for diagnosis and alternative treatment which may include;

- **Moisturiser (emollient) creams** which effectively form a barrier and may provide symptomatic improvement
- **Steroid creams or ointments**, sometimes combined with the use of occlusive dressings
- **Other skin applications** such as **tacrolimus ointment** which reduces irritation and inflammation through an immuno-modifying process.
- **Oral medication** which may be:
  - **Antihistamine** tablets or liquid
  - **Antidepressants** may be helpful in easing long-term itch
- **Phototherapy** using ultra-violet light to reduce pruritus.

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