HEALTH BASICS

Skin problems

Skin problems is a broad term for changes affecting your skin, hair, or nails.

WHAT IT IS
A broad term for changes affecting skin, hair, or nails

WHERE IT COMES UP
New rashes, growths, wounds, itching, or colour changes

WHY IT MATTERS
Some changes need treatment or prompt medical assessment

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a diagnosis or a single disease

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, primary care clinician, dermatologist, or urgent care service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Examination, sometimes swabs, scrapings, blood tests, or biopsy

Overview

"Skin problems" is an umbrella term, not a diagnosis or a disease. It covers many different changes involving the skin, scalp, hair, or nails.

Examples include a rash, dry or itchy skin, spots, blisters, sores, wounds, lumps, or changes in colour. Hair loss and changes in nail shape, colour, or texture can also be described as skin problems.

These changes can have many causes. Common possibilities include irritation, allergy, infection, inflammation, injury, medicine reactions, and long-term skin conditions. Some growths are harmless, while others need assessment.

Different conditions can look similar. A photograph or written description may help, but it is not always enough to identify the cause. A clinician may need to examine the affected area and ask how the change developed.

How it works

Your skin is more than an outer covering. It helps control body temperature, limits water loss,

provides sensation, and acts as a barrier against irritants and germs. Hair, nails, sweat glands, and oil-producing glands are also part of the skin system.

A skin change may begin when this barrier is damaged. For example, frequent washing, chemicals, friction, or dry air can make skin irritated and cracked. An immune reaction can cause inflammation, leading to redness, itching, swelling, or a rash.

Bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites can infect the skin. Some infections remain in one area, while others can spread across the skin or to other people.

Pigment cells give skin its colour. Changes in pigment may cause an area to become lighter or darker. Redness can be harder to see on brown or black skin, where inflammation may look purple, grey, or darker than the surrounding skin.

Skin cells, hair follicles, and glands can also grow or work differently. This can contribute to conditions such as acne, psoriasis, cysts, or skin growths. Because several processes can produce a similar appearance, the pattern, location, timing, and other health information all matter.

Why it matters for your health

Many skin changes are minor and settle with simple care. Others persist, return, spread, or require specific treatment.

Itching or pain can disturb sleep and affect work, exercise, or concentration. Cracked or damaged skin can allow infection to develop. Visible changes may also affect confidence and emotional wellbeing, especially when they involve the face, scalp, hands, or genitals.

A skin change can occasionally be connected to another health issue. For example, some rashes occur during infections or after medicines. Hair and nail changes can sometimes be associated with nutritional, hormonal, or inflammatory conditions. These links cannot be confirmed from appearance alone.

New or changing growths matter because some skin cancers begin as a changing mole, a new growth, or a sore that does not heal. Most skin changes are not cancer, but checking a concerning change allows an appropriate assessment.

What can go wrong

"Skin problems" includes several different groups of conditions and situations:

Seek emergency help for a sudden skin reaction with trouble breathing, faintness, or swelling

of the lips, tongue, mouth, or throat. These can be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

Widespread painful blistering or peeling, especially with sores in the mouth, eyes, or genitals, also needs emergency assessment. This is particularly important after starting a medicine.

Get urgent medical help if you feel seriously unwell with a rash, or if a red, purple, or dark rash does not fade when firmly pressed with a clear glass. On darker skin, check lighter areas such as the palms, soles, or inside the eyelids as well.

Arrange prompt assessment for rapidly spreading redness, warmth, swelling, or pain, especially with fever, pus, or red streaks. A painful blistering rash near an eye also needs urgent attention.

Routine follow-up is appropriate for changes that persist, keep returning, or interfere with sleep or daily life. Make an appointment for a changing mole, a new unexplained growth, or a sore that does not heal.

- Inflammatory conditions , such as eczema, contact dermatitis, psoriasis, acne, and rosacea
- Infections , such as cellulitis, impetigo, ringworm, cold sores, shingles, and scabies
- Allergic or medicine reactions , including hives and more serious blistering reactions
- Injuries , including burns, pressure injuries, cuts, and wounds that heal slowly
- Pigment and hair conditions , such as vitiligo, alopecia, and some nail disorders
- Growths , including harmless moles and cysts as well as skin cancers

What you can do

Keep a brief record of when the change began and how it has developed. Photographs taken in similar lighting can show whether it is spreading or changing. Do not delay urgent care to take photographs.

Record possible triggers, including:

Include prescribed medicines, non-prescription products, supplements, and creams. Do not stop a prescribed medicine solely because of a mild skin change without seeking advice. If there are signs of a severe allergic or blistering reaction, seek emergency help.

For dry or irritated skin, gentle washing and an unperfumed moisturiser may help protect the skin barrier. Avoid repeatedly trying new products on an active rash. Scratching can damage the skin, so keeping nails short may reduce injury.

A pharmacist can advise about minor problems and non-prescription products. Follow the label and ask before using a steroid cream like hydrocortisone or betamethasone on the face,

genitals, broken skin, or a possible infection.

A clinician may check the skin directly or use a dermatoscope, a handheld magnifying light. Depending on the suspected cause, tests may include a swab for bacteria, a scraping for fungus, allergy patch testing, or a biopsy. A biopsy removes a small skin sample for laboratory examination. Blood tests are useful only for selected concerns.

Useful questions include: "What conditions could cause this?", "Do I need a test?", "What changes should prompt urgent help?", and "How long should I try this treatment before follow-up?"

- New medicines or dose changes
- Skin, hair, laundry, or cleaning products
- Work materials, plants, metals, adhesives, or gloves
- Recent illness, travel, insect bites, or contact with affected people
- Changes in sun exposure, heat, sweating, or friction

Common questions

Can a skin problem be identified from a photograph?

Sometimes a photograph provides useful clues, but lighting, skin tone, texture, and the feel of a lump cannot always be assessed accurately. The history and an in-person examination may be important.

Does itching mean an allergy?

No. Allergy is one possible cause, but itching can also occur with dry skin, eczema, infection, medicine reactions, or other conditions. Itching without a visible rash may still deserve assessment if it is persistent or widespread.

Is every skin problem contagious?

No. Conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, acne, and most allergic reactions do not spread between people. Some fungal, bacterial, viral, and parasitic infections can spread. Until the cause is clearer, avoid sharing towels, razors, or skin products if infection is possible.

Should I check my own skin?

Knowing what is usual for your skin can help you notice change. Look for new or changing growths and sores that do not heal. Areas that are difficult to see may require a mirror or help from someone you trust. Self-checking does not replace professional assessment.

Which clinician should I see?

A pharmacist can help with some minor concerns. A primary care clinician can assess most persistent or unexplained changes and refer you to a dermatologist, a doctor specialising in skin conditions, when needed. Use urgent or emergency services for the warning signs described above.

Sources

- MedlinePlus: Skin Conditions , U.S. National Library of Medicine
- American Academy of Dermatology: Rash 101 in adults-when to seek medical treatment , American Academy of Dermatology Association
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- NHS: Cellulitis , National Health Service
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