CONDITION

Lichen urticatus

Lichen urticatus is an itchy skin reaction to insect or mite bites, also called papular urticaria.

WHAT IT IS
Recurring itchy skin reaction to insect or mite bites

BODY SYSTEM
Skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Itchy bumps, small blisters, clustered spots, dark marks

WHAT CAUSES IT
Immune sensitivity to insect or mite bites

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Clinical examination; skin biopsy if uncertain

MAIN TREATMENT
Bite prevention, skin treatments, and itch relief

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - often settles as sensitivity fades

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - breathing difficulty or throat swelling

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually resolves, though crops may recur for months or years

Overview

Lichen urticatus is an older name for papular urticaria . It is a skin reaction to bites from insects or mites. It most often affects children, but adults can develop it too.

Despite its name, it is not lichen and is not the same as ordinary urticaria, also called hives. Hives usually form raised, smooth patches that fade within hours. Lichen urticatus causes firm, very itchy bumps that can remain for days or weeks.

The reaction happens because the immune system becomes sensitive to substances in an insect's saliva. A bite may be too small to notice at the time. Later, itchy spots can appear in crops, meaning several new bumps develop together.

Fleas, bedbugs, mosquitoes, midges, mites, and other biting insects can be responsible. It is

not always possible to identify the exact source. Pets may carry fleas or mites, but lichen urticatus does not mean that a home or pet is unclean.

The condition is not contagious. You cannot catch it by touching someone's rash. However, several people in one household may be bitten by the same insects, and each person may react differently.

Symptoms

The main symptom is intense itching. Scratching may become difficult to control, especially at night.

Typical skin changes include:

The bumps are often found on uncovered areas such as the lower legs, arms, hands, and face. They may also occur around the waist or other areas beneath clothing. The pattern depends partly on the insect involved and where exposure takes place.

Each bump can last for several days or longer. Older spots may become itchy again when new bites occur. This can make the condition seem continuous even when individual bumps are slowly healing.

After inflammation settles, the skin may be lighter or darker than usual. This is called post-inflammatory colour change . It is more noticeable in some skin tones and may take months to fade.

Lichen urticatus usually does not cause fever, breathing problems, or a person to feel generally unwell. Symptoms beyond the skin suggest another condition or a more immediate allergic reaction and need separate assessment.

- Small, firm, raised red or skin-coloured bumps
- Groups or lines of spots that appear in repeated crops
- A tiny central dot where the bite entered the skin
- Small fluid-filled blisters on some bumps
- Older marks remaining as new spots appear

Causes and risk factors

Lichen urticatus is a delayed immune reaction to insect or mite bites. The reaction is stronger and lasts longer than the small temporary mark many people develop after a bite.

Possible triggers include:

Children are affected more often because their immune systems may not yet have become less sensitive to repeated bites. Some adults develop the condition after entering a new environment, moving to a different climate, travelling, or being exposed to an unfamiliar insect.

A tendency toward eczema or other allergic conditions may make itchy skin reactions more noticeable, but lichen urticatus is not itself a food allergy. It is also not usually caused by medicine, stress, or an internal disease.

Finding no insects does not rule it out. Fleas and bedbugs can be difficult to see, and the reaction may appear after the original bite. One person in a household may develop many spots while others have few or none.

- Fleas carried by cats, dogs, or other animals
- Bedbugs
- Mosquitoes and midges
- Mites associated with animals, birds, or the environment
- Other biting insects, including insects encountered during travel

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose lichen urticatus by examining the skin and asking about how the spots developed. The location, repeated crops, central bite marks, and length of time each bump remains can help distinguish it from hives.

They may ask about pets, recent travel, seasonal patterns, sleeping arrangements, and whether anyone else has itchy skin. This is not a judgment about cleanliness. It helps identify possible exposure.

There is no routine blood test that confirms lichen urticatus. Allergy testing is not usually useful because many possible insects can cause a similar reaction.

A small skin sample, called a biopsy , may be taken if the diagnosis is unclear. The area is numbed before a small piece of skin is removed and examined under a microscope. A biopsy can support an insect-bite reaction, although it may not reveal which insect caused it.

Other conditions can look similar. These include scabies, eczema, inflamed hair follicles, true hives, and other causes of persistent itchy bumps. Scabies is more likely when several household members have intense nighttime itching, especially between the fingers, around the wrists, or around the waist and groin.

Treatment and management

Treatment has two aims: calm the skin reaction and prevent further bites. Skin treatment alone may not stop new crops if exposure continues.

A healthcare professional may recommend a corticosteroid cream or ointment for inflamed bumps. These medicines reduce inflammation and are usually most helpful when applied early to new spots. The appropriate strength and length of use depend on age, body area, and severity.

An oral antihistamine may reduce itching, particularly when sleep is affected. Some antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine cause drowsiness and some are unsuitable for certain ages or health conditions, so follow advice from a pharmacist or healthcare professional.

Simple comfort measures can also help:

Finding and controlling the bite source is important. Pets may need assessment and flea treatment from a veterinarian. Washing bedding, vacuuming carpets and soft furnishings, and examining mattresses may help when fleas or bedbugs are suspected. A licensed pest-control professional may be needed if an infestation is difficult to find or remove.

Use insecticides and repellents only as directed on their labels. Household pest products should not be applied to skin unless they are specifically made for that purpose.

Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat the allergic reaction. They may be needed only if scratching has caused a bacterial skin infection.

- Apply a cool compress to itchy areas
- Use a plain, fragrance-free moisturiser
- Keep fingernails short to limit skin damage
- Avoid picking or opening blisters
- Cover badly scratched areas with a clean dressing

Complications

Repeated scratching can break the skin. Bacteria may then enter and cause impetigo , which often produces weeping areas or yellow-golden crusts. A deeper infection called cellulitis causes increasing warmth, pain, swelling, and spreading redness.

Dark or pale marks can remain after the bumps heal. These changes usually fade gradually, but

this may take several months. Persistent scratching can occasionally leave small scars.

Severe itching may disturb sleep, school, work, or concentration. Managing the itch and controlling repeated bites can reduce this effect.

Lichen urticatus itself does not normally progress to a dangerous illness. A rapid, whole-body allergic reaction after a new bite is different from the usual delayed bumps and should be treated as an emergency.

Prevention

Not every episode can be prevented. Bites may happen before an insect source is recognised, and some exposures occur outdoors or while travelling.

Reducing contact with biting insects can lower the chance of new crops. Useful measures may include wearing clothing that covers exposed skin, using window screens, and using an age-appropriate insect repellent according to its label.

If pets are present, regular veterinary flea control may be important. Treating only the animal may not be enough because flea eggs and larvae can remain in carpets, bedding, and furniture. Veterinary and pest-control advice can help prevent unsafe or ineffective product combinations.

For possible bedbugs, inspect mattress seams, bed frames, and nearby furniture for insects, shed skins, or dark spotting. Bedbugs are difficult to remove with cleaning alone, and professional pest control is often needed.

Prevention does not require excessive washing of your skin. Frequent use of harsh soap or disinfectant can dry the skin and worsen itching.

Living with it and what to expect

Individual bumps usually heal, but new crops may continue while bites occur. Because older bumps can become itchy again, the rash may seem to last longer than each separate reaction.

For many children, the sensitivity becomes less intense over months or years. The condition often settles as the immune system becomes used to the bites or as exposure stops. This cannot be predicted for one person, and occasional recurrences may happen.

Adults can also recover fully once the source is controlled. Persistent symptoms do not necessarily mean treatment has failed. Hidden exposure, delayed reactions, and a different skin condition may need to be considered.

Skin colour changes often last longer than the active itching. Protecting healing skin from scratching and sunlight may help marks become less noticeable, but fading is gradual.

Routine follow-up is reasonable if the diagnosis remains uncertain, outbreaks continue despite efforts to control insects, or treatment is not controlling the itch. Photographs of new crops and notes about travel, pets, seasons, or sleeping locations may help identify a pattern.

When to get medical help

Arrange a routine appointment if:

Seek prompt medical advice if the skin becomes increasingly painful, hot, swollen, or red, or if there is pus, spreading redness, fever, or yellow crusting. These changes may indicate infection rather than the usual bite reaction.

Get urgent assessment for a widespread blistering rash, sores involving the eyes or mouth, or a rash accompanied by significant illness.

Call emergency services for trouble breathing, wheezing, faintness, confusion, or swelling of the tongue or throat. These can be signs of anaphylaxis, a severe immediate allergic reaction. They are not typical features of lichen urticatus.

- Itchy bumps keep returning or the cause is unclear
- Symptoms are affecting sleep or daily activities
- Several household members have persistent nighttime itching
- The rash does not improve after the suspected bite source is controlled
- You need advice about safe treatment for a child or during pregnancy

Common questions

Is lichen urticatus contagious?

No. It is an immune reaction to bites and cannot spread through touch. If several people are affected, they may share exposure to the same insects. Scabies is contagious and can look similar, so household itching may need assessment.

Is lichen urticatus the same as hives?

No. Ordinary hives form smooth, raised patches that usually move or fade within 24 hours. Lichen urticatus produces smaller, firmer bumps that remain for days or weeks and may have a central bite mark.

Why do new bumps appear when I cannot find any insects?

The reaction may be delayed, the insects may be difficult to see, or older spots may flare after new bites. Fleas and bedbugs can hide in furnishings, while mosquitoes or other insects may cause exposure outside the home.

How long does lichen urticatus last?

A single bump may last days or longer. Repeated crops can continue for months if exposure continues or the skin remains highly sensitive. Many children become less sensitive over time, but the timing cannot be predicted.

Will the dark marks go away?

They often fade gradually after the inflammation stops. This may take several months, especially in darker skin tones. Scratching and repeated inflammation can make the marks last longer.

Does lichen urticatus mean my home is dirty?

No. Biting insects can occur in clean homes, hotels, public transport, workplaces, and outdoor settings. Pets can also pick up fleas despite regular care. Identifying the source is useful, but it is not a measure of personal hygiene.

Sources

- DermNet New Zealand. "Papular urticaria."
- Primary Care Dermatology Society. "Papular urticaria."
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. "Insect bites and stings: antimicrobial prescribing." NICE guideline NG182.
- NHS. "Insect bites and stings."