SYMPTOM

Itching

Itching is an irritating skin sensation that creates an urge to scratch.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
An irritating sensation that makes you want to scratch

WHERE IT IS FELT
One area or anywhere on the skin

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Dry skin, eczema, contact irritation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Widespread itch with yellow skin or eyes

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It persists despite self-care, recurs, or disrupts sleep

Overview

Itching, medically called pruritus, is a sensation that makes you want to scratch. It may affect one small area, several areas, or most of your body.

The skin may look dry, red, bumpy, cracked, or blistered. Sometimes it looks normal even when the itching is intense. Scratching can temporarily relieve the feeling, but repeated scratching may damage the skin and make itching worse.

Itching is a symptom rather than a disease. Possible causes range from dry skin and irritation to skin conditions, medicines, infections, and health problems elsewhere in the body. The pattern of itching and any other symptoms can help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

Itching may feel mild and distracting or strong enough to disturb sleep. Some people describe tingling, crawling, burning, or a feeling that something is moving on the skin.

You may notice:

Where the itching occurs can offer clues. Itching between the fingers or around the wrists has

different possible causes from an itchy scalp or widespread itching without a rash. The appearance alone is not always enough to identify the cause.

- Dry, flaky, rough, or cracked skin
- Redness, swelling, spots, bumps, or blisters
- Scratch marks, bleeding, or crusting
- Thickened skin after repeated rubbing
- Itching that worsens with heat, sweating, or at night

Common causes

Common causes include dry skin, eczema, contact irritation, insect bites, and hives. Dry skin is especially likely after frequent washing, hot showers, cold weather, or time in dry indoor air.

Eczema causes inflamed, itchy skin and may lead to dry or weeping patches. Contact dermatitis happens when the skin reacts to something touching it, such as soap, fragrance, jewellery, cosmetics, plants, or cleaning products.

Hives are raised, itchy welts that can change shape or move around the body. They may follow an infection, medicine, food, insect sting, or another trigger, although a cause is not always found.

Less common causes include scabies, head lice, fungal infections, psoriasis, and reactions to medicines. Scabies often causes intense nighttime itching and may affect close household contacts. Some infections can spread to other people, but most causes of itching are not contagious.

Widespread itching without a clear rash can sometimes be linked to liver, kidney, thyroid, blood, or nerve problems. Pregnancy can also cause itching. These possibilities are less common than dry skin or a skin condition, but they may need medical assessment.

Causes needing urgent assessment include a serious allergic reaction or a severe reaction to a medicine. Liver or bile-flow problems may cause itching with yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, or pale stools.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if itching starts with trouble breathing, wheezing, faintness, or swelling of your tongue or throat. These can be signs of a severe allergic reaction called

anaphylaxis.

Seek urgent medical care if you develop:

Book a routine appointment if the itching persists despite self-care, keeps returning, affects much of your body, or regularly disturbs sleep. You should also arrange an assessment if there is no visible rash, a medicine may be involved, or scratching has caused broken or infected skin.

Increasing pain, warmth, swelling, pus, or spreading redness can suggest a skin infection and should be assessed promptly.

- Yellow skin or eyes, especially with dark urine or pale stools
- A widespread rash with fever, blistering, peeling, or painful skin
- Sores or blisters involving your mouth, eyes, or genitals
- Rapid swelling of your face or lips
- Itching in pregnancy, especially on your palms or soles

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the itching began, where it occurs, and whether it is constant or comes and goes. They may ask about new skin products, medicines, travel, animal contact, illnesses, pregnancy, and whether anyone close to you is also itchy.

Your skin, scalp, nails, and the spaces between your fingers may be examined. The pattern and appearance can sometimes identify a likely cause.

If the cause remains unclear, tests may include a skin scraping for mites or fungus, allergy patch testing, or a small skin sample called a biopsy. Blood tests may be considered for widespread or persistent itching without an obvious skin cause. These can check blood cells and the function of organs such as the liver, kidneys, or thyroid.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. An infection, inflammatory skin condition, medicine reaction, or internal health problem may require specific care.

To reduce irritation:

A pharmacist can advise whether a non-prescription treatment is suitable. Antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine may help some causes, particularly hives, but they do not relieve every type of itch. Some can cause drowsiness and affect driving or other tasks requiring alertness.

Mild steroid like prednisone or hydrocortisone creams may help certain inflamed rashes. Follow the product instructions, and ask for advice before using them on the face, genitals, broken skin, or large areas. Avoid assuming that every itchy rash is eczema, because steroids can worsen or hide some infections.

Do not stop a prescribed medicine without advice. If itching began after starting a medicine, contact the prescriber or a pharmacist.

- Apply a fragrance-free moisturiser regularly, especially after washing
- Use cool or lukewarm water instead of hot showers
- Place a cool, damp cloth on the itchy area
- Wear loose, breathable clothing
- Keep fingernails short and avoid vigorous scratching
- Choose unperfumed soaps, detergents, and skin products

What to expect

Itching from mild dryness or brief irritation may improve within days after the trigger is removed and the skin barrier recovers. Insect bites and short-lived allergic rashes often settle over days to weeks.

Conditions such as eczema can come and go. Infections usually improve only after the correct treatment. If an internal health problem or medicine is responsible, improvement depends on addressing that cause.

Try to limit scratching while the skin heals. Repeated scratching can create an itch-scratch cycle in which skin damage produces even more itching. Seek follow-up if symptoms are worsening, spreading, or not responding as expected.

Common questions

Can itching happen without a rash?

Yes. Dry skin may cause little visible change, and some medicine, nerve, liver, kidney, thyroid, or blood-related causes may produce itching without a primary rash. Scratching can later create redness or marks.

Does itching mean something is contagious?

Usually not. Dry skin, eczema, contact reactions, and hives do not spread between people.

Scabies, lice, and some fungal infections can spread through close contact or shared items.

Why is itching sometimes worse at night?

Warm bedding, dry skin, and having fewer distractions can make itching more noticeable. Some conditions, including scabies and eczema, may also become more troublesome at night.

Can stress cause itching?

Stress can intensify itching and increase scratching, especially when a skin condition is already present. It should not automatically be assumed to be the only cause of new or persistent symptoms.

Sources

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