SYMPTOM

Scales

Scales are visible flakes or plates of dead skin on the skin's surface.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Dry, rough, flaky, or sometimes itchy skin

WHERE IT IS FELT
Anywhere on the skin, often scalp, face, hands, or legs

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Dry skin, eczema, psoriasis

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Rapid peeling with blisters, fever, skin pain, or mouth sores

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, depending on dryness or an underlying condition

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, widespread, painful, infected, or not improving with self-care

Overview

Scales are flakes or thin plates of dead skin cells that build up on the skin's surface. They may look white, gray, silver, yellow, or brown, depending on their cause and your skin tone.

Scaling is a symptom rather than a diagnosis. It can happen when skin is too dry, inflamed, growing faster than usual, or affected by an infection. It may involve one small patch, several areas, or much of the body.

Scale is different from a crust. Scale is made of dry skin cells. A crust forms when fluid, pus, or blood dries on the skin. Both can appear together if a rash has been scratched or is leaking fluid.

What it may feel or look like

Scales can be fine and powdery, like dry flour, or thick and firmly attached. The skin underneath may look normal, red, darker, lighter, or shiny.

You may also notice:

Scaling from simple dryness often affects the lower legs, hands, or areas exposed to cold air

and frequent washing. Greasy scales commonly occur on the scalp, eyebrows, or beside the nose. Thick, silvery scales may form on raised patches, but appearance alone cannot confirm the cause.

On darker skin, inflammation may look purple, gray, or deep brown rather than bright red. Color changes can remain after the scaling settles.

- Dryness, tightness, itching, or burning
- Rough patches or clearly outlined plaques
- Cracks that sting or bleed
- Greasy flakes, especially on the scalp or face
- Hair or nail changes alongside the scaling

Common causes

Common causes include:

Less common causes include fungal infections such as ringworm, inherited conditions that make skin unusually dry and scaly, reactions to medicines, and inflammatory conditions affecting the immune system. A persistent rough or scaly spot, particularly on sun-exposed skin, sometimes needs examination to rule out abnormal skin-cell growth.

Rarely, widespread scaling or peeling is part of a serious medicine reaction or severe infection. These conditions usually cause other symptoms, such as skin pain, blisters, fever, or sores in the mouth or eyes.

- Dry skin: Cold weather, low humidity, hot showers, harsh soaps, and frequent handwashing can strip protective oils from the skin.
- Eczema: This causes an inflamed, itchy skin barrier. The skin may be dry, cracked, thickened, or leaking fluid during a flare.
- Seborrheic dermatitis: Often called dandruff when it affects the scalp, this can cause greasy or powdery scales on oily areas.
- Psoriasis: This long-term inflammatory condition can produce clearly defined, thick, scaly patches. It may also affect the scalp and nails.
- Irritant or allergic contact dermatitis: Skin may scale after contact with products such as detergents, fragrances, metals, hair dyes, or cleaning chemicals.

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if the scaling lasts for more than a few weeks, keeps returning, spreads, disrupts sleep, or does not improve with gentle skin care. Arrange an assessment sooner if patches bleed repeatedly, cause hair loss, affect your nails, or appear after starting a new medicine.

Seek same-day medical care if you have:

Call emergency services if extensive blistering or peeling occurs with trouble breathing, facial or throat swelling, fainting, severe weakness, or confusion.

- Rapidly spreading redness, warmth, swelling, or tenderness
- Pus, worsening pain, fever, or red streaks near cracked skin
- New blisters, skin peeling, or sores in the mouth, eyes, or genitals
- A painful widespread rash after starting a medicine

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the scales started, whether they itch or hurt, and which products or medicines you use. Recent illness, travel, contact with animals, workplace exposures, and similar symptoms in other household members may be relevant.

The pattern often provides useful clues. The examination may include your scalp, nails, skin folds, and areas that do not seem affected.

If a fungal infection is possible, a small scraping may be examined under a microscope or sent to a laboratory. Patch testing can help identify a contact allergy. Less often, a small skin sample called a biopsy is taken after numbing the area. Blood tests are not usually needed unless other symptoms suggest a wider medical condition.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Measures that may help uncomplicated dry, scaly skin include:

For scalp scaling, regular gentle washing may loosen flakes. Medicated dandruff shampoos can help some causes; follow the product label and ask a pharmacist if you are unsure which type is suitable.

Eczema or psoriasis may require anti-inflammatory creams or other prescribed treatments.

Fungal infections need antifungal treatment rather than anti-inflammatory treatment alone. Using a steroid cream like hydrocortisone or betamethasone on an unidentified rash can change its appearance and may allow some infections to spread.

Do not scrape thick scales or use strong acids, solvents, or household remedies to remove them. These can injure the skin and increase the risk of infection.

- Wash with lukewarm rather than hot water
- Use a mild, fragrance-free cleanser only where needed
- Apply a thick fragrance-free cream or ointment after washing
- Avoid scratching, scrubbing, or pulling off attached scales
- Wear gloves when using detergents or cleaning products

What to expect

Scaling caused by dry air or irritating products may improve over days to weeks once the trigger is reduced and the skin barrier is moisturized. Scaling linked to eczema, psoriasis, or seborrheic dermatitis often comes and goes. Treatment can control symptoms, although further flares may occur.

Fungal infections usually improve with the correct treatment but can return if treatment is stopped too soon or the source of reinfection remains. Follow the product instructions or treatment plan you receive.

After inflammation settles, the skin may remain lighter or darker for a while. Seek another assessment if the area continues to spread, becomes painful, or does not respond as expected.

Common questions

Are scales contagious?

Scales themselves are not contagious. Some causes, including ringworm, can spread through skin contact or shared objects. Eczema, psoriasis, dry skin, and seborrheic dermatitis are not contagious.

Should I remove the scales?

Do not pick or force them off. This can cause bleeding and infection. Moisturizing or using a treatment recommended for the underlying cause allows scales to loosen more safely.

Does dandruff mean my scalp is dirty?

No. Dandruff is often related to oil production, skin inflammation, and normal scalp yeast rather than poor hygiene. Washing patterns and hair products can affect how noticeable it becomes.

Can stress cause scaling?

Stress does not explain every scaly rash, but it can worsen conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, and seborrheic dermatitis. Changes in sleep, weather, illness, and skin products can also contribute.

Sources

- American Academy of Dermatology Association: Dry skin-Diagnosis and treatment
- American Academy of Dermatology Association: Seborrheic dermatitis-Diagnosis and treatment
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: About ringworm
- DermNet: Scaly skin diseases
- MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine: Psoriasis
- NHS: Atopic eczema