

Lichen Sclerosis

What is Lichen Sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis is a common skin condition that is not infectious or cancerous cannot be passed on to other people. It can cause severe itching and soreness on the affected skin. Uncontrollable scratching may cause bleeding. Lichen sclerosis usually affects women but can affect children and men too.

Lichen sclerosis most commonly affects the vulval skin. However, the whole vulval area and the skin around the anus can be affected. Other areas of skin, for example the armpit and thigh, can be involved too. The skin may become thickened, rough and white or thin and shiny. Little fissures like paper cuts may develop. The vulval skin folds may 'stick down' or 'melt away'. In severe cases the opening to the vagina may become very narrow and so use of a tampon may be painful. Passing urine over the affected skin may also sting.

Lichen sclerosis does not spread internally to the vagina or rectum even if it is severe. Changes stay on the external skin.

What causes Lichen Sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis is not caused by an infection. It is not linked with female hormone changes with contraceptives, HRT or the menopause.

It seems to be an auto immune condition where the body 'attacks' itself. People with lichen sclerosis may have other autoimmune conditions such as thyroid disease or some types of anaemia.

How is it diagnosed?

Lichen sclerosis often has a characteristic appearance which lets the doctor diagnose it simply by looking at the area. A skin biopsy is needed if there are unusual features or if the condition is not responding to initial treatment.

What is the treatment?

An important part of the treatment is to avoid any chemicals which may worsen the vulval irritation.

The main treatment is a prolonged course of steroid cream. This is applied daily to the whole affected area for a month and then gradually reduced. The cream called Dermovate^R seems to work well for most women with lichen sclerosis but there are other options.

The treatment should begin to reduce the itching quite quickly. Any skin splits should begin to heal. Changes in the skin folds shape and colour may not go right back to normal.

After the four month course some women can stop treatment all together. Other women need to continue applying the cream once or twice a week long term.

Some women need to use the treatment for a few days every few months to treat a flare up of symptoms.

A 30g tube of cream should last at least 3 months.

Lichen sclerosis is a bit like asthma, treatment and lifestyle changes can control symptoms very well but may not provide a lifelong cure.

People often worry about side effects from steroids. Although this can be a problem with steroid tablets, the recommended dose of cream should not cause any side effects, either with skin thinning or elsewhere in the body.

Surgery may be offered if the lichen sclerosis has narrowed the vaginal opening. However, this is a rarer treatment.

Follow Up

An appointment can be booked around 6 months after treatment to see how things are going. If your symptoms are getting better, a further appointment may not be necessary.

There is a small risk that cancerous changes could develop in women with longstanding lichen sclerosis. This may affect 3-4 women in every 100. These changes would show up as a lump or skin split or sore that did not heal with 2-3 weeks of treatment with steroid cream. The doctor should be notified of these changes.