

Pruritus: Why Am I Itching?

What is pruritus?

Pruritus (proo-RY-tis) is itchy skin or a feeling that you need to scratch. It can hurt and can cause sleep problems and depression if it becomes severe.

What causes it?

The cause isn't always known, but dry skin is most common. Many other skin problems can cause itching, often with a rash. Serious medical conditions, like kidney or liver problems, sometimes cause itchy skin.

How is pruritus treated?

There are simple things you can try at home. Avoid common household products that might be making you itch, like perfumes, detergents, and fabric softeners. To prevent dry skin, bathe less often and don't use hot water. Make sure you rinse off all of the soap, pat skin dry, and use a gentle moisturizing cream or ointment (for example, petroleum jelly).

If using a moisturizer three times a day doesn't help, ask your doctor about using an over-the-counter cream called hydrocortisone. Your doctor may need to prescribe a pill to stop the itching or to treat a skin infection.

When should I see my doctor?

If home treatments don't work, you should see your doctor. You should also see your doctor if you are older than 65 years, your itching is severe with no obvious cause, or your skin is red, swollen, warm, or leaking fluid.

Your doctor can probably tell what is causing you to itch by examining you and asking you questions, but you may need a skin test.

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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